# Gospel for the Graveside

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# ≈SERMONS\*

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FUNERAL SERVICE

I like funerals! I don't mean I enjoy them. I mean that I approve of them. I think they are important. I decided this after burying a person without a funeral service recently. It was one of those cold, gloomy, wintry days. The clouds hung like a wet sponge over the earth. They seemed to be waiting for someone to reach up and squeeze the rain out of them.

The wind cut to the bone as we stood on the hill of the cemetery. That sad occasion was made sadder still by the fact that no one was there except the deceased, the funeral director, and me. There were no flowers, no friends, no family. Just the three of us.

I thought to myself, "This is not right. A person deserves more than this. There should be a service. There should be some flowers. There should be friends and family. This is not the way it ought to be."

I guess I had always taken funerals for granted. I had never really considered their value. Because of that experience, I thought of some reasons why I think funerals are important.

## The Affirmation of Life

First, funerals are important because they affirm the value of life. The way we treat the dead ultimately reveals what we think about life. The more we value the living, the more tender and compassionate we are with the dead. In fact the way we care for our dead reflects more of the important values we hold.

The British statesman Gladstone once said, "Show me the way in which a nation cares for its dead, and I will measure with mathematical exactness, the tender sympathies of the people, their respect for the laws of the land, and their loyalty to high ideals."

We cannot value a life and disregard the dead. A funeral service is an opportunity to express our beliefs in the dignity and the worth of every individual.

A party of American tourists drove into an impressive U. S. military cemetary at Nettuno, Italy, where thousands of white crosses marked the graves of American soldiers who had died in World War II. One tourist said briskly to the American sergeant on duty "We're in a hurry, sergeant. To save time, could you tell us if there is anybody famous buried here?"

"As far as I'm concerned, sir," the sergeant replied, "they are all famous."

That's the way I feel. Every person is made in the likeness and image of God. That fact alone makes them important and they deserve to be treated with the honor and respect that is consistent with the fact.

I realize that it is the spirit of man and not the body of man that is made in God's image. I also realize that at death the body returns to the dust of the earth, and the spirit returns to God who made it (Eccl. 12:7). But that does not make the body less important. The body was also created by God. When we become Christians, the body becomes the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 6:19). And when Jesus returns to the earth the second time, our body shall be resurrected from the grave ( Cor. 15:20-23).

So, the fact that God created it, the Holy Spirit indwells in it, and our Lord will resurrect it shows that the body is important to God. It must be important to us also. How we treat it in life and in death is a reflection of our value of life. The funeral, then, is a recognition of the value of the total person to us and to God.

# Consolation of the Bereaved

Second, funerals are important because they provide an opportunity to give comfort to the living. The loss of a loved one in death is about the most traumatic experience a person can suffer. "Death," to use the beautiful expression of Fulton J. Sheen, "is not separation of two hearts, but the tearing apart of one heart."

Every part of the funeral service should be designed in some way to help in the healing of broken hearts. Every society has established customs and rituals for dealing with death. These are necessary. We must have some ceremonies to help us to know when we have done what is right and proper in certain situations. When a person has observed those rituals he can feel, "I have done all that I can. I have done that which is proper." That within itself is a great help.

But the Christian funeral is an opportunity to help even more. It is an opportunity for friends to come and share our grief and loss. We are challenged in the scriptures to ... weep with them that weep (Romans 12:15).

Everyone needs that sympathetic support in their hour of loss. The funeral service is an opportunity for that to take place.

The music can help also. Appropriate music which contains words of assurance and hope can soothe our troubled spirits. But most of all the word of God helps us. God's word can bring comfort and strength when nothing else will help. After the apostle Paul gave a comprehensive explanation of death and the resurrection in I Thess. 4:13-18, he then admonished us to... comfort one another with these words.

All of these together-the ritual, the friends, the flowers, the music, and the word of God-make the funeral service important as a means of comforting and sustaining the broken-hearted.

# Proclamation of the Gospel

Third, the funeral service is important because it is an opportunity to proclaim our Christian hope. We cannot live happily, fully, and victoriously without hope. Paul said in I Cor. 15:19, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable."

When we lose hope in the life beyond, we lose all restraint in this life. And tragically, we begin to live by the philosophy, "Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

It is important then that our beliefs in the resurrection be kept alive and openly proclaimed. The French philosopher Ernst Reanan wrote something our generation needs to remember. He said, "The day in which the belief in an afterlife shall vanish from the earth, will witness a terrific moral and spiritual decay. Some of us might do without it, provided only the others hold fast. But there is no lever capable of raising an entire people if once they have lost their faith in the immortality of the soul."

The funeral service is an opportunity to share the gospel with the world. In the New Testament, the gospel centers around several events. First, Christ lived. Second, He died for our sins. And finally, He was resurrected from the grave on the third day. Now through faith in Jesus Christ we can all share in this resurrected life (I Cor 15:1-4, 20-23).

That was good news then. It is good news today. Our world still needs to hear such a message. Life does not end at the cemetery. Jesus Christ has conquered death. And because He lives we shall live also. The world needs to hear that proclamation of faith.

Don't underestimate the importance of funerals. Do not think they are meaningless, pagan rituals as some suggest. Don't ever look upon them as necessary evils or routine duty. They are an opportunity to proclaim our value of life, our love for the living, and our hope for the future. That makes them important to every minister. Therefore, always make adequate sermon preparation so that you speak a word of comfort and hope from God.

# PREPARATION OF THE FUNERAL SERMON

At the outset of His earthly ministry Jesus stood in the synagogue in Nazareth and read from Isaiah the prophet, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, he hath sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19).

If you are to be a ministering minister you must make Jesus' priorities your priorities. High on this list must be the work of "healing the brokenhearted." No man pastors very long until he learns that Joseph Parker was right when he said, "In every pew there is at least one broken heart."

All about us are people whose lives have been crushed and bruised by the sorrows of life.

None of the responsibilities of the pastor are more difficult than those associated with funerals. Several things make this true. For one thing, we must deal with people in the most traumatic experiences of their lives. No experience is more shocking than the death of a loved one. And oftentimes the circumstances of death are most perplexing. Accidents, suicides, murders, and untimely deaths are commonplace. It is not easy to comfort people and to bring them closer to God in times like this.

Then, too, death usually comes with such short notice that there is little time to prepare the funeral message. With all the other demands placed upon him and such a short time to prepare, the minister may be tempted just to muddle through the sermon. But as Andrew W. Blackwood said, "Death comes only once. There should be no ministerial muddling." Our God is no muddler.

Somehow, someway, the busy pastor must find time to prepare and preach effective funeral messages.

I suggest that every young pastor begin early in his ministry to prepare at least a dozen funeral messages that present clearly and concisely the Christian view of death and our future hope. These could be prepared and preached first as regular sermons. Then they could be abbreviated, polished, and refined by being preached over and over again at funerals. After a few years in the ministry, he would have an ample number of effective, well-prepared funeral messages of comfort and hope to be used in every conceivable situation. That is what I have done and it has proved most helpful to me.

There are three basic suggestions that I want to offer concerning the preparation of the funeral sermon.

#### Be Biblical

First, be biblical. What kind of life exists beyond the grave? Today people are inquiring into that question as never before. For centuries Bible-believing Christians have been certain of endless life. Now even scientists are telling us there is scientific proof of life after death.

Each year hundreds of books and magazine articles dealing with death and dying are put on the market. Even some public schools now offer courses in thanatology. There is a vast new interest whirling about scientific claims of proof of the afterlife.

But the only certain word concerning life after death comes from one source-the Bible. We must sound forth that sure word in the funeral sermon. The world's only hope of life after death rests in Jesus Christ who died, was buried, and was raised again on the third day. Because Jesus Christ arose from the dead, we will live also. If Jesus Christ had not risen from the dead, then hope of everlasting life would be nothing more than an empty dream. But His resurrection is God's great receipt that our sins have been forgiven and that we shall share in his risen life.

So, whatever else you say or leave unsaid in a funeral sermon, be sure to tell people what God's word has to say about life beyond the grave. Don't spend your time on speculations, meaningless poetry, flowery eulogies, or useless arguments. Tell the people what God says. Give them a word of hope from His word.

As you preach on the various doctrines of eschatology [last things] in your regular worship services, you prepare the people for that moment when death knocks on their door. Then at the hour of death, you can reaffirm that faith clearly with a biblical message.

#### Be Personal

Second, be personal. Someone has said that death is not a factory gate through which men go in crowds, but a turnstile through which they go one by one. Remember that when you preach the funeral sermon. The person you are burying is unique. He or she is dear and special to someone. Call the deceased by name. Make some personal references to his life, or work, or family.

A funeral service ought to contain, if possible, a good word about the deceased. We must be careful not to say too much. And there are times when it is simply better to say nothing. However, we can usually find a gracious word for the bereaved because they need to be comforted.

If possible, make the funeral sermon fit the person. If the deceased was a godly woman, you may want to preach about the ideal woman described in the book of Proverbs, chapter thirty-one. If he was athletic, you may want to preach on "Finishing the course faithfully" (1 Tim. 4:6-8). If he liked the outdoors and camping, you may want to talk about our body as a tent (11 Cor. 5:1).

But be careful not to talk too much about the deceased. Focus mainly on Jesus Christ and our eternal hope. William Carey spent his life in India as a missionary. As he came to the end of his days, he had many visitors. Among his last visitors was a young man named Mr. Duff. At the end of one visit, Mr. Duff heard as he left the room a feeble voice calling him back. "Mr. Duff!" said Carey softly but with earnestness. "Mr. Duff! you have been speaking about Dr. Carey. When I am gone, say nothing about Dr. Carey, speak about Dr. Carey's Saviour."

This should be the desire of every earnest Christian and the primary thrust of every funeral sermon. Send the people home thinking about God instead of the deceased, life instead of death, and heaven instead of the grave.

#### Be Brief

Third, be brief. The funeral service should be characterized by orderliness, simplicity, and brevity. The one request I have most often from families is that the funeral service be brief.

The statement "A sermon need not be eternal to be immortal" was never more appropriate than at a funeral. A sermon ten or fifteen minutes in length is ample for almost any occasion. It should be short and full of meaning and hope. The appeal should be mainly to the heart, not to the head. In this respect many funeral messages miss that mark. They are totally intellectual. They attempt to prove what the heart already feels.

While the funeral message ought to be short, still there need be no appearance of haste. The truth of God stated simply and briefly and re-inforced by scripture and illustrations and poetry is enough.

The preacher faces no greater opportunity and no greater challenge than the funeral message. There will be people present in the funeral service who are seldom, if ever, in church. They will listen with more attentiveness than ever before; therefore, tell them in a few words how to be saved and how they can know eternal life. Be true to your calling.

If we are to fulfill our ministry, a part of which is to heal the brokenhearted, we must somehow become masters at the craft of funeral sermons. Our ministry to the bereaved is too great to be taken lightly. We must start now to make sure that our funeral messages are effective. One day you'll be glad you did.

#### AFTER THE FUNERAL =>

The wife of Duke McCall, retired president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and former president of the Baptist World Alliance, died several years ago. In explaining some of his feelings, Dr. McCall wrote, "After a church service, a well-intentioned acquaintance caught me off guard by saying, 'I am sorry you lost your wife.' Before I could edit my response I said, 'I did not lose my wife. I know where Margueritte is. I am the one who is lost,"

Anyone who has had a loved one die knows how devastating it can be. It leaves you disoriented, distraught and lost. It takes us a long time to find ourselves.

The pastor who is really interested in "healing the brokenhearted" soon realizes that his work is not finished when he has preached the funeral sermon or conducted the graveside service. Grief goes on and so must our ministry to the grieving.

What can the minister say and do at such a time that will be helpful to the family? There is no one dramatic gesture or pearl of wisdom that will dissolve the heartache, but there are many acts of ministry that can convey your concern and help to soften the blow that the person has suffered.

I offer several practical suggestions learned from personal experience as a pastor who also wrestled with the awkwardness of what to do after the funeral is over.

## Reach Out to Them

First, be there. For a long time I dreaded going to see people when they had lost a loved one because I thought I had to say something comforting and I didn't know what to say. In time I realized, however, that words may not be the primary need of grieving people. Your presence is what counts.

This is the first thing the bereaved needs above all else. Long after they have forgotten what you say they remember that you came.

Even a government agency like NASA recognizes the importance of being there. Following the fire and explosion that destroyed the Challenger space shuttle, the families of each of the seven astronauts who died had another astronaut family at their side soon after the disaster. The support families were there to help the Challenger families with everything from travel and food arrangements to boarding the family pet. "With all the vast technology of our space age," said Clark Covington, manager of the Space-Station Project at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, "there is still nothing more powerful than one human being reaching out to another."

# Bound By a Thousand Cords

Second, help them understand their grief. Grief is a person's reaction to a loss. The more meaningful the loss, the more intense the grief. Many people, when they experience grief, wonder what's happening to them. When there comes a numbness of spirit, the loss of memory, the trembling of limbs, they wonder, "Am I dying, too?"

When the tears come uncontrollably - or not at all - when they can't sleep, when they have feelings of anxiety, fear, anger and guilt, they wonder, "Am I going crazy?" or "Is there something wrong with me?"

Actually, each of these can be a normal part of the grieving process, and it is important to help people understand that.

As in Gulliver's Travels, where Gulliver lay tied to the earth by the stakes and ropes of the Lilliputians, so the grief sufferer, too, is bound by a thousand emotional cords to the person who has died. These ties are not loosed easily or quickly.

A widower may come home from work at night and open the door to the aroma of his wife's cooking - though nothing is on the stove. If you ask a widow, she will tell you her husband is dead. But she may also tell you she hears him in the kitchen at night, getting a snack as he often did in life. She is struggling with separation. Her husband is gone, but her memory is vividly present, and she misses him terribly.

A widow may continue to set two plates at the dinner table for months. She reaches out to touch him in the bed.

Spouses may even find themselves talking to their dead mate long after they are gone. The husband of a friend of mine died. In their 35 years of marriage she had never taken out the garbage. He always did that. She was putting out the garbage one day, and before she thought she looked up and said, "See what you've done Charlie, You left me and now I have to do something I never did before. I have to carry out the garbage."

Several years ago a teenager in our church was killed in an automobile accident. After the funeral his mother asked me, "Do you think it will be okay if I talk to Kirk?" I said, "Yes, I think so."

Then I told her what the late Peter Marshall once said, "Those we love are with the Lord. The Lord has promised to be with us. Now, if they are with Him and He is with us, they can't be far away."

#### Learn to Listen

Third, be a good listener. For most people, talking is an effective means of releasing emotions and undergoing healing. So listen! That will help as much as anything you do.

In their grief people may ask, "Why, God?" "Why did this happen to me?" Don't be a glib Bible quoter. Simplistic answers to complex questions are not only unhelpful, they can be harmful. Statements like, "This is God's will," or "God knows best," are theologically shallow and provide little or no comfort. It is better to hear their questions as cries of pain rather than literal questions.

And don't attempt to tell the bereaved how he/she feels. To say, for example, "You must feel relieved now that he is out of pain;" is presumptuous. Even to say, "I know how you feel" is questionable unless someone has told you his feelings. I know how I feel about my father's death. I really don't know how you feel about your father's death. Learn from the mourner. Don't instruct.

# **Emotional First Aid**

Fourth, let them express their grief. Grief resembles steam in a steam engine; unless it can escape in a controlled way, pressure builds up and the boiler explodes. Griefwork must be done. Griefwork will be done. Eventually, correctly or incorrectly, completely or incompletely, in a creative or distorted manner, the work will be done. So, emotional release should be encouraged. Comments like, "Be strong," or "You've got to hold up for others," tells the person it's not okay to cry, to hurt, or to be angry; it's only okay to "be strong." Holding the person's hand or putting your arm around their shoulder indicates that it's okay to grieve.

One way to express grief is through tears. There is a Jewish proverb that says, "What soap is to the body, tears are to the soul." Tears can help cleanse the soul.

Some people think that faith and tears don't mix. They think a sturdy faith in God and the promise of life eternal are out of keeping with sobbing and a display of grief. But grief does not deny faith.

When Mary and her companions took Jesus to the town cemetery where Lazarus was buried Christ stood before the tomb, and the text states simply and profoundly, "Jesus wept." Those simple words speak volumes about the inner feelings of Jesus and His reaction to grief at the death of His friend.

Seeing His tears, friends of the family remarked, "See how much He loved him!" In that incident, Jesus refuted by His tears the notion that "big boys don't cry." He who remains history's perfect and complete man stood by the graveside and wept.

Psychologist Dr. Joyce Brothers, following the death of her husband, wrote about her own tears, "The standard reaction to a widow's tears is to say, 'There, there, you mustn't cry. Tears won't help,' But tears do help. They are a kind of emotional first aid. A widow will stop when she no longer needs to cry."

# What Can Wait, Should

Fifth, encourage the postponement of major decisions during a period of grief. When a person is in deep sorrow they may decide to sell their home, quit their job or make other decisions they will later regret. Grieving people need to realize that no matter how they feel at the moment, their feelings will change. Things will look different in time. So, whatever can wait should wait until after the period of intense grief.

# Comfort the Children

Sixth, don't ignore the children of the family. Children, because of their limited experience, may not understand all that has happened when a loved one dies, but don't assume that a seemingly calm child is not sorrowing.

Children do grieve and they grieve deeply. At such times the greatest gift you can give a child is an understanding heart. A child's feelings are worthy of respect. Jesus took time for little children and so should we.

# Use the Lay People

Seventh, encourage others to visit and help. Among life's greatest blessings in time of grief are friends and fellow church members. They are often instruments of God's grace.

Since a pastor has many people to minister to, he should enlist, train and encourage his people to join him in ministering to the grieving.

Deacons, Sunday school classes and select individuals can be effective in this way. Some of them will have the gift of consolation. And they will have the time to reach out to the brokenhearted. They can drop by for a cup of coffee. They can take them to lunch. They can listen. And in time they can help draw the grieving back into outside activities.

They need not be trained counselors. As psychologist Bernie Zilbergeld said, "If you simply want to talk to someone, it probably doesn't make a lot of difference whom you select, as long as you feel comfortable and he or she is listening."

# Grief is Major Surgery

Eighth, stay in touch. Grieving takes a long time. Exactly how long depends on the circumstances or the loss, the depth of the relationship, and the emotional makeup of the griever. It is not unusual for it to last a year or more.

Grief may be compared to recovering from surgery or the healing of a broken bone. God has built into the human body a remarkable capacity to heal itself. Many physicians will tell you that all they do is cooperate with and use the natural healing processes. But even with the body's capacity to heal itself, as suggested previously, it takes time for it to adjust to and overcome the effects of serious surgery or for a broken bone to heal. The loss that causes grief is major surgery. The healing takes time.

One way to stay in touch is by mail. When I was a pastor I made a practice each Christmas and New Year season of writing a note to each member of my congregation who had lost a loved one during the year. Holidays are the worst times of the year for grieving people and Christmas is the hardest of all the holidays.

In the notes I spoke of my love for the deceased and my concern for and availability to them especially at that time. It was a simple gesture but it was one of the most appreciated things I did.

# It Helps Them to Help

Ninth, in time gently draw the mourner into quiet outside activities. Especially, if you lead them to do something for somebody else, something that helps them feel useful, you will be helping them. Activity is a crucial ingredient to the healing process.

Jesus is our model for ministry as well as our master. When His friend Lazarus died, He went and He wept and He witnessed - after the funeral was over. That's what we must do also if we are to help heal the brokenhearted.

#### A WORD FOR THE PASTOR

# TEACH YOUR PEOPLE TO MINISTER

When death strikes, people want to help but often do not know what to do. While grief is not a trip you can pack for, and it is utterly lonely, there are things people can to do help. The wise pastor will not only minister to the grieving himself, he will also teach his people what they can do. Here is what they can do to help:

- Get in touch. Telephone. Ask when you can visit and how you might help. Take the initiative. Don't be afraid of intruding. Your friend may be suffering too much to know what he or she needs.
- Attend to practical matters. Offer to help answer the telephone, usher in callers, prepare meals, clean the house, care for the children, mow the lawn, sort through the mail. This kind of help lifts burdens and creates a bond.
- Say little on the first visit. Before the burial, a brief embrace, a press
  of the hand, a few words of affection may be all that is needed.
- · Be yourself. Show concern and sorrow in your own way.
- Avoid clichés such as "He is out of pain," "Time heals all wounds,"
   "At least he didn't suffer" or even "I know how you feel." You don't and you can't know. A simple "I'm sorry" is better.
- Keep in touch. Be available. Grief can't be fixed in a hurry. It's not like a root canal - 50 minutes of pain and a night of medication and then it's over. Recognize that recovery takes time - often a long, long time.
- · Encourage others to visit and help.
- Accept silence. If the mourner doesn't feel like talking, don't force conversation. Silence is better than aimless chatter.

- Be a good listener. This is the one thing the bereaved needs above all else. Is she emotional? Accept that. Does she cry? Accept that too. Is she angry with God? Accept whatever feelings are expressed. Your presence - your willingness to listen are the two most precious gifts you can offer.
- Do not attempt to tell the bereaved how he or she feels. To say, for example, "You must feel relieved now that he is out of pain," is presumptuous. Even to say, "I know just how you feel," is questionable. Learn from the mourner; do not instruct.
- Do not probe for details about the death. If the survivor offers information, listen with understanding.
- Comfort children in the family. Do not assume that a seemingly calm child is not sorrowing. Be a friend to whom feelings can be confided and with whom tears can be shed. In most cases, children should be left in the home and not shielded from the grieving of others.
- Avoid talking to others about trivia in the presence of the recently bereaved.
- Go to the funeral or memorial service to swell the ranks, to be one member of a community mourning an irreplaceable person.
- Allow the "working through" of grief. Do not whisk away clothing or hide pictures. Do not criticize seemingly morbid behavior.
- Write a letter of condolence store bought cards don't take the place of a personal letter, no matter how short or awkwardly worded. The most meaningful letters describe happy memories you had with the deceased.
- Encourage the postponement of major decisions. Whatever can wait should wait until after the period of intense grief.
- In time, gently draw the mourner into quiet outside activity.

- When the mourner returns to social activity, treat him or her as a normal person. Avoid pity. It destroys self-respect. Simply understanding is enough.
- Be aware of needed progress through grief. If the mourner seems unable to resolve anger or guilt, suggest a consultation with a clergyman or another trained counselor.
- In time-share your faith a prayer, a verse, a good book may be enough. God is the "God of all comfort" and if we can witness to him in a kind and gentle way, we help eternally.

You may have to give more time and more of yourself than you imagined, but you will know the satisfaction of being truly helpful.

#### A WORD FOR THE PASTOR

# HELPING A CHILD DEAL WITH DEATH

Death, to a child, especially if it's the death of a parent, can be as mysterious as it is traumatic. Until around ages 9 or 10, children do not fully comprehend death. They may or may not cry. Nonetheless, the loss and grief is real.

When we told my 8-year-old grandson his mother might die, his primary concern seemed to be himself-what's going to happen to me? Who will take care of me? (See Chapter 1).

The awareness that his mother was not coming home again was slow and painful.

While each child, just like each adult, is different, there are some things we can do to help a child prepare for death.

- Explain death to your child in terms they can understand. Perhaps you could compare it to a cicada shell: You leave behind your body, which actually serves as a shell for your spirit. Once you die, your spirit leaves your body and goes to heaven to be with God. Your body is left behind and is buried by your loved ones in remembrance of you.
- Visit a funeral with your child, noting that the dead person is happy in heaven but acknowledging that friends are sad because they will miss hugging and talking to the person.
- Let your child express his or her fears and acknowledge them realistically. Evening prayer can be a time when parents "listen" to what is on the child's mind.
- Purchase a pet for your child to love far in advance of the expected death, on an occasion that is not associated with a birthday or any other holiday.
- Create a loving daily ritual to be shared by the healthy parent, or other caregiver, with your child, and continue it after the other parent's death.

Prepare audiotapes or videotapes of your child.

 While you should never blame God for what has happened, you should bear witness to the child of Christ's death, burial and resurrection.

#### A WORD FOR THE PASTOR

# USEABLE QUOTES FOR FUNERALS

- After the death of novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald, poet Stephen Vincent Benet wrote: "You can take off your hats now, gentlemen, and I think perhaps you had better. This is not a legend, this is a reputation, and it may well be one of the most secure reputations of our time."
- Charlie Drew was an outstanding black scientist who discovered that blood plasma was preferable to whole blood for the transfusions and thus laid the foundation for today's vast blood program of the American Red Cross.

He died two months shy of his forty-sixth birthday. Speaking at the funeral, Howard University Medical School President Johnson said, "Here we have what rarely happens in history-a life which crowds into a handful of years significance so great that men will never be able to forget it."

- 3. When scientist Isaac Newton, who formulated the law of gravity and made many other wonderful discoveries, died at age eighty-four, his countrymen buried him in Westminster Abby, among kings and bishops with a fitting epitaph: "Mortals, congratulate yourselves that so great a man has lived for the honor of the human race."
- 4. When Methodist Bishop Warren A. Candler died, a friend wrote of him, "When he left us, it was as if a great tree had fallen in the forest, 'and left a lonesome place against the sky."
- 5. Quentin Reynolds, in a tribute to Leon J. Livingston, said, "There once lived a wondrous good and wise man named Socrates. But he gave offense to those who were in power and they jailed him; told him that he would have to die. Socrates received the news with a smile.

"You should prepare for death," they told him, but he shook his head and kept on smiling.

"I have been preparing for death all my life," he said.
"In what way?" they asked.

And Socrates said, "I have never, secretly or openly, done a wrong to any man."

 When Dag Hammarskjold came to New York to assume his duties as secretary-general of the United Nations, he left with his sister Ullastina in Sweden a Bible which had originally belonged to their mother.

> Later he died in a plane crash in Africa. On the day after Dag's funeral, that Bible was opened by his brother Sten.

Tucked between the pages was a poem which was recognized as being in Dag's boyish handwriting, written in Swedish when he was perhaps eleven years old. We have translated it into

rhymed English.

Was it his poem? We do not know, but in the heart of Africa it became his epitaph:

The Day that you were born you wept, But all around you were glad: So live that when your last day comes, It will be their turn to be sad, And you will be the only one With never a tear or trace As with a calm and serene heart You meet death face to face.

- After Lincoln's death, Carl Sandburg, in Lincoln And The War Years, wrote, "A tree is best measured when it is down."
- 8. At the funeral of Hubert Humphrey, Vice-President Walter Mondale quoted Shakespeare, "A good leg will fall. A straight back will stoop. A black beard will turn white. A curled pate will grow bald. A fair face will wither. A full eye will wax hollow. But a good heart is as the sun and the moon, for it shines bright and never changes, but keeps its course truly." From Henry V-Act Five, Scene Two, Line sixteen.

- 9. When Rufus Choate left America for the Old World land in which he died, a friend said, "You will be here a year hence. " The famous lawyer answered: "Sir, I shall be here a hundred years hence and a thousand years hence."
- The last words of missionary James Burns were, "I have been dying for twenty years. Now I am going to live."
- 11. Rev. Robert J. Burdette, shortly before his death, wrote a personal letter to the editor of an Eastern paper, saying: "I watch the sunset as I look out over the rim of the blue Pacific, and there is no mystery beyond the horizon line, because I know what there is over there. I have been there, I have journeyed in those lands. Over there where the sun is sinking is Japan. That star is rising over China. In that direction lie the Philippines. I know all that. Well, there is another land that I look toward as I watch the sunset. I have never seen it. I have never seen anyone who has been there, but it has a more abiding reality than any of these lands which I know."
- Martyred missionary Jim Elliot said, "I seek not a long life but a full one, like you, Lord Jesus."
- 13. When Sidney Lanier was striken with tuberculosis, he felt deserted and defeated. One day as he sat looking at the marsh on the coast of Georgia, he was moved to write: "As the marsh-hen secretly builds on the watery sod, Behold I will build me a nest in the greatness of God."
- 14. C. M. Ward said, "No Christian has ever been known to recant on his deathbed."
- 15. There is a bronze statue outside the Hall of Archives in Washington, D.C. that has a young girl on a chair, leafing through a book. The girl is turning the last page, but on inscription beneath the statue are these words, "All that is is Prologue." That composes our Christian hope. Earthly just a prologue to something great and wonderful.

- 16. Someone has said: "When two people are Christians they never say goodby for the last time."
- 17. E. L. Godkin, once editor of the New York Evening Post, after the death of his young daughter wrote: "When my little darling left her father's house for the last time last Friday, I felt assured that somewhere, a wise and better Father awaited her, and that, in His care, she would one day become all, more than all, that I rashly and fondly hoped to see her in mine."
- 18. John Donne, a great writer and a popular preacher, was preoccupied with thoughts of death. In one of his prose volumes, entitled "Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions," he wrote words that Ernest Hemingway used for the title of one of his finest novels: "No man is an island, entire of it self; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the Maine; if a clod bee washed away by the sea, Europe is the lesser . . . Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankinde; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee."
- 19. Sir Thomas More said, "I have lived. I have labored. I have loved. To love and labor is the sum of living. Now the day is far spent, and the night is at hand. The time draweth nigh when man shall rest from his labors. But still he shall love, and he shall enter into rest through Him who is Light, and Life, and Love."

#### \* THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF DEATH \*

Philippians 1:21-24

When Corrie ten Boom, author of *The Hiding Place*, was told she needed a pacemaker implantation operation, she said, "The choice was: go to heaven or have this operation." Then she added, "The former would have been more wonderful for me, but there is much to do here, so I accepted the latter thankfully."

This is the view of life and death that every Christian ought to have. The apostle Paul expressed the same view when he wrote, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labor: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you" (Phil. 1:21-24).

Paul was in a Roman prison awaiting death when he wrote these words. They express his mixed emotions as he thought about life and death. The word "strait" refers to a narrow passageway. He uses this word to express the emotions he felt between his desires and his sense of duty.

He uses two words to describe how one ought to view death. First, he speaks of death as a gain. The word gain is a business term that means "to make a profit." When Paul looked at the bottom line of his life, he felt that death would be net gain and not a loss.

Second, he describes death as better. The word "better" is a term of comparison. It means "advantageous" or "a step up." Life for Paul was good, but he looked upon death as going to be with the Lord, as better—a step up.

These are not the words of a bitter old man who is fed up with life. He is not saying that death is the lesser of two evils. He is saying that death is the greater of two blessings. Life was good and exciting but death would be better. If he continued to live, he would serve Christ faithfully. But if he died, he would be able to see Christ face to face.

The passage presents to us the Christian view of death. Unfortunately, not everyone shares this view of death. There are those who view death as though it were the end. To them it is total loss. It is the final separation. Others view it as the cessation of existence to be faced with grim resignation. They say we should accept it with no show of emotion. And there are those of us who view death as a gain.

We need to look at these three views of death today. Our view of death determines how we respond to it. There are three ways:

- · Some respond to death with despair
- · Others respond to death with resignation
- · We respond to death with hope

#### Death as a Total Loss

First, some people face death with despair. They see it as the final parting—the last good-bye. These are people who have no hope of life after death. Years ago South African golfer Gary Player conducted a survey on his own to find out what people believe about life after death.

He asked airline stewardesses, taxi drivers, bellhops, waitresses, and everyone else he could what they believed happened to a person once they died. Almost unanimously they said that when a man dies he is dead like a dog is dead. To them death is the end. There is nothing else.

What a sad and dismal view of life and death. Some unknown poet expressed the hopelessness of many when he wrote:

> Oh, to have no Christ, no Saviour How lonely life must be! Like a sailor lost and driven, On a wide and shoreless sea.

Oh, to have no Christ, no Saviour, No hand to clasp thine own! Through the dark, dark vale of shadows, Thou must press thy way alone.

But thanks be to God, we do have a living Saviour. Death is not the final act in the drama of life. After death there is heaven and the presence of God for His people. Death as Nothing

Second, there are others who face death stoically to be accepted with grim resignation. This view was first expressed by a Greek philosopher named Zeno, who lived in 30 B.C. He taught that a wise man should be free from all passions. He should subdue all emotions; he should accept death without question and without emotion. This viewpoint is called stoicism.

The influence of the Stoics is still with us today. It sometimes disguises itself as a Christian virtue. It says that tears are a denial of our faith and if we really believe in God we would not cry. It says that we must accept life, be brave, and keep a stiff upper lip.

There is no doubt that we must accept life, It was the habit of Margaret Fuller to explain in her eager, happy manner, "I accept the universe." When this was told to Thomas Carlyle, the old man remarked sardonically, "She'd better!"

We really have no other choice but to accept the universe. But we are not expected to accept it without emotion, without tears, without display of feeling.

Jesus wept at the grave of His friend (John 11:35). And He wept over the rejection and lostness of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). The apostle Paul's whole ministry was characterized by tears (Acts 20:19, 31; Il Cor. 2:4).

Disraeli said, "Never apologize for showing feeling. Remember that, when you do so, you'll apologize for the truth." We are feeling people. We do have emotions and it is not wrong to express them.

The Bible doesn't forbid sorrow. It only limits it. We are told that we should not sorrow ". . .as if we had no hope" (I Thes, 4:13). That doesn't teach total abstinence, only moderation. We needn't act as if death were nothing. We mustn't act as if it were the end.

## Death as Gain

Third, we Christians face death with hope and optimism; we view death as a gain. This is what Paul expresses when he says, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

What do we gain at death? We gain release from the sufferings and hardships of this life. When Paul penned these words, he was in a Roman prison awaiting death. His life had been one of physical hardship. Because of his faithfulness to Christ, his body was

#### EVIDENCE FOR THE LIFE BEYOND

II Timothy 1:10

The question of the ages was first posed by Job when he asked, "If a man die, shall he live again?" (Job 14:14). Centuries passed before there came a certain answer. It was given to us by Jesus when He said to a waiting world, "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26).

Until Jesus came, man's hope in life beyond the grave was obscure. It was hazy and shadowy at best. When Jesus came, one of His missions was to assure broken humanity that there is life after death. Again and again, He said, "I am come that you might have life and have it more abundantly."

The apostle Paul affirmed this same truth when he said that Jesus ". . .abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel . . . " (II Tim. 1:10).

This statement is written against the backdrop of God's grace given to us through Jesus Christ. Paul mentions two things that are a part of the redemptive, life-giving work of our Saviour.

First, He has abolished death; and second, He has brought life to lifeless men who are under sentence of sin's death.

Because of these two facts, death has been conquered.

I want you to note five reasons why we believe there is life beyond this moment of sorrow:

- · Our universal instincts
- · The rebirth of nature
- · The witness of science
- · The weight of reason
- · The resurrection of Jesus

# The Nature of Man

The first evidence of immortality is man's universal instincts.

Man has always instinctively believed in life beyond the grave. He has believed it not because he could prove it. He has rather tried to prove

scarred from many stonings and beatings. Death to him would mean release from the hardships and trials of this world.

Secondly, we gain reward for our lives of faithful service. Paul had given himself unselfishly and untiringly for the work of Christ. Was prison to be his final reward? Was this all he was to gain for his suffering?

If so, there is no justice in the universe. No! His reward was

in heaven. He would gain it at death.

But most of all, we gain reunion. Paul's death meant going to be with Christ. He had no anticipation of sleeping unconsciously in the grave as some teach. He expected to go immediately into the presence of the Lord.

Socrates, the Greek philosopher, is quoted in Plato's Apology as saying, "If death should only prove to be a dreamless sleep, it would be a wonderful gain." But this falls far below the apostle's expectations. He expected more than a dreamless sleep. He expected to enter into the presence of the living God.

This is the hope of every Christian. At death we gain release from the sufferings and hardships of this life. We gain our reward for our life of faithful service. And most of all we gain the full presence of the Lord. Since our loved ones who have died are already in His presence, we will also have a glorious reunion with them.

Vance Havner lost his wife of thirty-three years. Naturally, it was a heart-rending experience. But after reflecting upon his loss he said, "I haven't really lost her, of course, because I know where she is. And you haven't lost anything when you know where it is."

We can say that also today. We really haven't lost our loved ones, because we know they have gone to be with the Lord and we can go there also one day.

Boris Pasternak, in his book Dr. Zhivago, had Nikolai say, "It was not until after the coming of Christ that man could breathe freely. It was not until after Him that men began to live toward the future."

Jesus, through His death, His resurrection, and His ascension has transformed death from a total loss to a capital gain. It has become the doorway to our complete salvation. Now for the first time we can breath freely. . and we can live toward the future—unafraid of death.

it because he could not help but believe it. The earliest traces of man found by anthropologists show that they held formal burial rites and even placed flowers in the grave. All of this indicates a belief in the afterlife.

In 1922 the tomb of King Tut of Egypt was discovered. This was one of the most amazing archaeological discoveries of the ages. It carried us back thirty-two-hundred years into history and allowed us to see some of the things that were done and believed during that period of time.

King Tut, who was pharaoh of Egypt for nine years, died in 1950 B.C. at the age of eighteen. In his tomb over five-thousand dazzling works of art were discovered. Why all of this?

Thomas Hoving gives us the answer, "To the ancient Egyptians it was vital that his body should be fully equipped for every need in the after life..."

So, the belief in immortality is as old as man. Emerson voiced it well when he wrote, "When God wants to carry a point with His children, He writes His arguments in the instincts." It is so with the life beyond. God has placed in us a strong longing for everlasting life. It is a strange, restless feeling so that we are never quite at home here.

While the belief is instinctive, it is not without basis.

# The Witness of Nature

A second evidence of immortality is the continual rebirth of nature. Man has always been able to look at nature and see in it an evidence for immortality. Martin Luther said, "Our Lord has written the promise of the resurrection not in books alone, but in every leaf in the springtime." And Henry David Thoreau reminds us, "Spring is a natural resurrection, an experience in immortality."

Fresh green leaves appear in the spring. They grow to maturity in the summer. In the fall with the coming of cold weather and frost the leaves turn brown, yellow, and red and fall to the ground. The dead leaves decay and replenish the soil. The next spring the whole process starts all over again. There is a sense then in which nothing ever really dies. Nature seems to say, "Nothing is ever lost. New life comes out of old. While all things die...all things live again."

The witness of nature reminds us that there is a new life beyond the grave.

#### The Evidence of Science

Third, there is the evidence of science. Dr. Werner Von Braun, America's premiere space scientist, expressed the certainty of our Christian hope in this way, "Many people seem to feel that science has somehow made religious ideas untimely and old-fashioned. But I think science has a real surprise for the skeptic. Science, for instance tells us that nothing in nature, not even the tiniest particle, can disappear without a trace. Nature does not know extinction. All it knows is transformation.

Now if God applies this fundamental principle to the most minute and insignificant part of His universe, doesn't it make sense to assume that He applies it also to the human soul? I think it does. Everything science has taught me and continues to teach me strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death. Nothing disappears without a trace."

# Testimony of Logic

Fourth, there must be added to all of this the weight of reason of logic. If science teaches us that matter is indestructible, it does not make sense that God would create a being as complex and sensitive as man just to snuff him out forever like the flame of a dime store candle.

As Arthur H. Compton, Nobel prize-winning physicist, wrote, "It takes a whole lifetime to build the character of a noble man. The adventures and discipline of youth, the struggle and failures and successes, the pain and pleasure of maturity, the loneliness and tranquility of age – these make up the fire through which he must pass to bring out the pure gold of his soul. Having been thus perfected, what shall nature do with him? Annihilate him? What an infinite waste! I prefer to believe he lives on after death, continuing in a larger sphere, in cooperation with his Maker, the work he had here begun."

But with all of that – instinct, nature, science, and reason – life beyond the grave was still only an obscure hope, a shadowy wish, until Jesus Christ came.

# The Light of Jesus

The surest evidence of life after death is the resurrection of Jesus. As the apostle Paul declares that He has "abolished death and brought life and immortality to life through the gospel" (II Timothy 1:10).

The word abolish means to "bring to naught, to make no effect, to rend powerless." David Redding said, "Everyone knows that death did something terrible to Christ, but not everyone knows He did something wonderful to death. The New Testament does not assert merely that Jesus has survived death. Through His life and death and resurrection, Jesus Christ defeated death. So the punch line of the New Testament is not a tragic cry, 'Help,' but a triumphant shout, 'Hallelujah!'"

At this moment death may appear to be the victor. It looks so final. But looks can be deceiving. Through Jesus Christ it has lost its sting. It has become a doorway to life instead of extinction. Since Jesus came, we can live until we die and then we can live forever.

He brought life and immortality to light. This means that He brought it out into the open so that we could see it in its reality. He illuminated the life beyond so that we need no longer grope in the darkness of doubt and uncertainty.

Through Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, death has been conquered and our victory has been assured. Life is now here! Through faith in and commitment to Him, we can share in that glorious life. Because He lives we shall live also.

#### CHAPTER THREE

## 

Psalm 23:4

Henry Ward Beecher called the twenty-third Psalm the Nightingale Psalm. He called it that because, as he said, "the nightingale sings its sweetest when the night is its darkest." He must have had in mind the words of David, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me," when he gave it that title.

The valley of the shadow of death literally means the place of dark gloom or inky blackness. It has reference to any dark and gloomy experience of life through which we may have to travel. It is not limited exclusively to death, although it does include death.

Dark experiences come to all people. Being a Christian does not exclude us from anything, Christians have accidents. Christians get sick and Christians die just like everyone else.

Henry W. Longfellow expressed this truth when he wrote:

There is no flock however tended,
But one dead lamb is there!
There is no fireside, however defended,
But has one empty chair.

Death comes to all of us and to all those whom we love. While having the Lord as our shepherd grants us no immunity from sorrow, it does assure us of His presence, His peace, and His promises as we go through it.

These are three things that enable us to sing even in the valley of the shadows of sorrows. The psalm speaks of them, There is:

- · A presence we can all know
- · A peace we can all experience
- · A promise we can all claim

# A Presence To Experience

First, there is a presence we can all know. David says, "...I will fear no evil for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

Fear is in all probability the greatest enemy of mankind. And the fear of death is the greatest of all fears. As soon as people begin to love life, a fear of death is born. That is understandable. After all, death is an unknown – a mystery. And it seems so final.

But Christians do not need to be afraid of death. We are assured that the Lord walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death and that He will comfort us. The word comfort here literally means "to give forth sighs". It suggests to us that the Lord is so close by our side that he shares our hurts, our feelings, and our pains. He enters into the depths of the experience with us.

The scripture declares that He is the God of all comfort. Paul writes, "Blessed be God, even the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulations..." (II Corinthians 1:3-4).

The Greek word for comfort here means "called alongside." It suggests being called out to help, not in remote or detached service, but by involvement in the stress of the afflicted.

A laborer staggers under a load; a fellow-worker runs to share the burden. A man is pinned under wreckage; his neighbor runs to lift the weight. A derelict bleeds in the emergency room; a surgeon rises to fight all night long for his life. To comfort means becoming involved in distress, sharing the pain in order to relieve it. This is what God does for us.

Alexander Maclaren, a great preacher, tells about when he accepted his first job in Glasgow. He was just sixteen and his home was about six miles from the big city. Between his home and Glasgow there was a deep ravine that was supposed to be haunted. Some terrible things had happened in it and he was afraid to go through it in the daytime. At night it was out of the question.

On Monday morning his father walked with him to work and in parting said, "Alec, come home as fast as you can when you get off Saturday night."

Thinking of that deep ravine, McClaren said he answered his father, "Father, I will be awfully tired Saturday night. I will come home early Sunday morning."

But his father was insistent, "No, Alec, you have never been away from home before, and these five days are going to seem like a year to me. Come home Saturday night."

He reluctantly answered, "All right, Father, Saturday night."

All week long Alec said he worried about that black ravine. When Saturday night came, he was more scared than ever. But he wrapped up his belongings and went out to the end of the gulch. He said, "I whistled to keep my courage, but when I looked down into the inky blackness I knew I couldn't go on. Big tears came unbidden. Then suddenly I heard footsteps in the ravine coming up the path. I started to run, but hesitated, for those footsteps were very familiar."

"Up out of the darkness and into the pale light, as I watched, came the head and the shoulders of the grandest man on earth, my father. He was bound to have known I was scared, but he only said, 'Alec, I wanted to see you so badly that I came to meet you.' So shoulder to shoulder we went down into the valley and I was not afraid of anything that walked."

That's the way it is with Christians. When our time comes to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we can do it in calm assurance, for the Lord is there to walk with us.

### A Peace To Enjoy

Second, there is a peace we can all enjoy. David says, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies, thou annointest mine head with oil, my cup runneth over, surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life..."

With this verse the image changes from pasture to a palace. God is no longer portrayed as the good shepherd. He is now the gracious host. In His presence hostility and strife are gone. We are at peace with our enemies.

What is the enemy David is talking about? It is death, the last great enemy of man (I Corintians 15:26). And he is saying that even in the presence of death those who follow the shepherd can have peace.

It is this peace that Isaiah spoke of when he wrote, "I will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee" (Isaiah 26:3). This was the peace that Jesus promised when he said, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, I give unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27). And this is the peace that Paul described when he said, "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7). When death comes, we may bring beautiful flowers and sing lovely songs, but these cannot make the grave a place of cheer. It is only the presence of the Shepherd that can give us calm assurance and peace in the hour of death.

### A Promise To Expect

Finally, there is a promise we can all claim. Again David says, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." The word "dwell" means "to settle down and be at home with." When we come to the end of our way, there is the prospect, the hope, that we will settle down and dwell at home with God forever. This is the same promise that Jesus made when He said, "And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and they shall sit down in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29).

This language goes beyond earth. It describes heaven itself. Death is real. We can see that. But heaven is real also.

Robert Millinkin, the noted scientist, said, "The divine architect of the universe has not built a stairway that leads to nowhere." Beyond this life is the father's house. And it is pictured for us as a place for unbounded joy and unending goodness where we shall dwell forever.

David was an old man when he wrote this psalm. He had seen tragedy, disappointment, heartache, and even death. But he had come to know the Lord as his shepherd and he now lived with the confidence and assurance in Him. Out of that experience he gave us this song we can all sing in the dark shadows of sorrow. It is a song of His presence, His peace, and His provision.

The apostle Paul closes his great chapter on the resurrection by saying, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" He then breaks out in the triumphant note, "But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 15:55-57). That is our hope today!

Jesus Christ is the good shepherd. He has come to conquer death, to walk with us through life, and to comfort us in our sorrow. Now, like the nightingale, we can sing even when the night is its darkest.

### WHEN IS A PERSON READY TO DIE?

II Timothy 4:6-8

Throughout life we are always preparing for something or someone. We seem to be forever making ready for some coming event. We prepare for school, for marriage, for our careers, for a family, for retirement. Strangely enough we spend almost all of the time preparing to live. It is as though we think we will live on and on.

Even though we know by observation and scripture that life is fleeting, we act as if we will live forever. Hours pass into days, days pass into weeks, weeks pass into months, and months pass into years, and the first thing we know our life has passed altogether.

We ought to prepare to live. God wants us to enjoy life and to be prepared for it. However, death is a fact of life. The Bible assures us that "it is appointed unto men once to die." Our life is like a vapor – the morning mist that is soon burned off by the mid-day sun. We do not know what shall be on tomorrow. Therefore we ought not only to prepare to live but to prepare to die.

How do we prepare for death? When is a person ready to die? The scriptures give us the answer. The apostle Paul tells us when he writes: "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (II Timothy 4:6-8).

Paul describes his death as a departure. "Departure" is a naval term that means "to weigh anchor and set sail." I grew up on the seacoast. Many times I have stood on the shore and watched a ship pull away. Gradually it became a mere speck as it finally disappeared beyond the horizon. Usually someone standing by would say as it disappeared, "It's gone." I have often thought as they said that, "Gone where?" Not out of existence, only out of sight.

That's a good picture of death for Christians. Death is a passing – not out of existence, only out of sight. Out beyond our sight is a whole new world of existence that simply is not visible to us. That's what Paul had in mind here. There is no dwelling on the morbid side of death for him. His outlook is filled with optimism and hope. It is a powerful and positive view of life and death that he expressed here.

Paul stood on the edge of life and shook hands with death without the slightest fear or dread and said, "I am ready." This should be the attitude of every Christian.

What is it that makes a person ready to live and ready to die? What can a person do to have that kind of calm assurance? There are three things in this scripture.

- · A firm commitment
- · A fruitful life
- · A future hope

### A Firm Commitment

First, a firm commitment in Jesus Christ will help us to be ready to die.

The apostle Paul was ready to die because he had put his faith and confidence in the one who was able to keep him. He said, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day" (II Timothy 1:12). The word "committed" is a banking term. It means "to make a deposit in a place of safety and security." Paul had made his deposit with God through faith in Jesus Christ; thus his future was safe and secure.

No person is really ready to live or die until he has made that same kind of commitment. It is only by committing your life to Christ that you can ever say, "I am ready." Have you made your commitment? Do you have this calm assurance? Can you say today with the apostle, "I am ready"?

We are never more secure than that to which we commit ourselves. Several years ago I went on a mission trip deep in the jungles of Central America. As we traveled through the jungles, we often came to swollen rivers that had to be crossed. The only boats available were dug-out canoes. They had been made by the Indians and left on the river banks for just such purposes. Huge trees were cut and then the heart of them had been burned and chopped out. They were small, crude, and shaky, but sufficient for crossing the river. As adequate as they were for crossing the river, they would never do for crossing the ocean. To make such a journey would require a ship much larger and much stronger.

As you make your journey in life, you may be able to make it through many of life's experiences in your own strength. But when it comes to crossing the vast expanse of death into eternity, only Jesus Christ is significant for us. To entrust ourselves to anything or anyone less than He is to choose that which is insufficient for our needs. We can stand on the banks of the river of death and peer out into eternity without any fear if we have made a commitment of ourselves to Jesus Christ.

### A Faithful Life

A second thing that can make us ready to die is a faithful life. When we have done our duty, fulfilled our mission, and been true to our commitment, we can say, "I am ready."

Paul had done that. He cast a swift glance back over his past life and summed it up in three brief sentences. He said, "I have fought a good fight. I have finished my course. I have kept the faith" (II Timothy 4:7). All three of these statements are an expression of his faithfulness in living for Jesus Christ.

Paul saw life as a struggle. He felt he had fought the good fight. The fight was Jesus' fight and he had joined hand and heart with the Lord Jesus in the battle. He saw life as a race. He had run the course that had been marked out for him. And his life was a trust he had kept and been true to the faith. Now he was ready to die. Any person who has committed his life to Jesus Christ and then lived faithfully can come to his hour of death with no fear and few regrets. They can have this same calm assurance.

### A Future Hope

Finally, a future hope makes us ready to die. Paul, having taken a swift glance over his past life, quickly makes an about face to look at the future. He says, "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (II Timothy 4:8). The word "henceforth" literally means "what remains."

Paul says in essence, "I have followed Jesus and have lived a faithful life. Now, what remains for me is a crown of righteousness which the Lord has prepared for me."

The crown Paul talks about is the victor's crown that was given to the winner of an athletic contest in the Greek games. It was made of oak, ivy, or laurel leaves and was symbolic of immortality. So, what Paul is saying is, "What remains for me is immortality which God has prepared through Jesus Christ. And it is not just for me, but for all those who love him." This is the kind of hope that sustains us in the face of death.

Some people have no hope beyond the grave. Caesar stood in the Roman Senate and said, "If there is anything beyond the tomb, I do not know."

Robert Ingersoll once wrote this little poem:

Is there beyond the silent night
An endless day,
Is death a door that leads to light;
We cannot say.
The tongueless secret locked in fate
We do not know;
We hope and wait.

But death to the Christian is not the end. Through Jesus Christ there is hope of more to come.

Roman soldiers often roamed and camped deep inside the multi-tunneled Rock of Gibralter. Because they thought that a few miles farther into the west lay the end of the world, the jumping-off place, the words NE PLUS ULTRA properly described the area: "nothing more beyond." Soldiers chiseled these words in many places on the tunnel walls.

After Columbus discovered America, other soldiers frequented the tunnels with which the Rock of Gibralter is honeycombed. In many instances when they saw the words NE PLUS ULTRA, they would file away the negative NE. The remaining words PLUS ULTRA mean "more beyond." How tragic would be the human situation if when we bury our loved ones, we had to inscribe on their caskets NE PLUS ULTRA: Nothing More Beyond. But since the death and resurrection of Christ every Christian can have the words "More Beyond" as the epitaph on his tombstone.

Here then are the things that enable a man to look death in the face and calmly say, "I am ready." A commitment to Christ, a consistent walk, and a certain hope.

# WHEN THE MYSTERIES WILL BE CLEARED

1 Corinthians 13:12

Sir Harry Lauder, the Scottish singer and entertainer who was loved by the whole world, had an only son who was killed in a trench on a battlefield in France. In his terrible grief Sir Harry said, "I found three possible ways to escape. One was drink—I could drown my sorrow in debauchery and dissipation. Another was suicide—I could hide myself in the grave. The third was God—I could cast all my care upon Him."

Then Sir Harry Lauder said, "In my sorrow I found God."

The same options are open to us. We can seek to escape or we can seek God. If we are wise, we will turn to God and cast all our cares on Him. Tragedy always leaves many unanswered questions in our minds.

But God promises us neither exemption from nor explanation for the troubles of life. He has only promised us strength and help. And He assures us that if we walk with Him by faith today, one day our questions will be answered.

The apostle Paul declared this when he wrote, "For we now see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: Now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (I Corinthians 13:12).

This is teaching by contrast. Twice in this one verse he used the word "now" and twice he uses the word "then." Now we see through a glass darkly and now we know in part. But then, that is, in heaven, we shall see face to face and then we shall know as we are known.

The word "glass" means a "mirror." Before men had discovered how to make glass mirrors, they were usually just a piece of polished brass. At best it gave a distorted and obscure reflection.

The truth Paul was pointing out is that in this life the way we see things is limited. But in heaven all the mysteries of life are going to be cleared up. There we will see all things clearly and understand all things completely.

There are at least three mysteries that will be cleared up in

heaven. This truth is a tremendous encouragement to us to keep trusting in God even in the midst of experiences like this which we do not understand. Look at them for a moment with me.

- · The mystery of suffering
- . The mystery of death
- · The mystery of eternity

# The Mystery of Suffering

First, the mystery of suffering will be cleared up in heaven. When a tragedy like this happens, the most natural and immediate question we ask is "Why has this happened?" We can see no reason for it and we are overwhelmed by the mystery of it.

We ache for an explanation. Since the beginning of time men have been mystified by suffering and have cried out to God for an answer.

In the Old Testament Gideon was puzzled by the mystery of suffering when he saw the people of God being overrun by their enemies. He cried out, "If the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us?" (Judges 6:13).

The Psalmist makes a confession of his confusion when he says, "But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps were well nigh slipped for I was envious of the foolish when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (Psalm 73:2-3).

The prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous posed such a dilemma to him that he almost lost his faith in God.

Even the Son of God was perplexed by the actions of God when on the cross he cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). And today you are asking the same question—Why?

While it is not wrong to ask God why things happen, do not be surprised if God remains silent. In this life we must live by faith. We must keep believing in and relying on God even when we do not understand why things are happening.

We must keep on believing that God loves us. We must continue to believe that nothing shall separate us from His care. We must keep believing that all things work together for our good if we love God and are the called according to His purpose. And we must keep believing that one day in heaven God will explain to us why these things have happened.

# The Mystery of Death

Second, the mystery of death will be cleared up in heaven. Death is the oldest and most persistent enemy of man. Since the first person died, man has stood terrified in death's presence. Francis Bacon was right when he said, "Men fear death as children fear to go into the dark; and as the natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other."

The Bible teaches us much about death. We know that death entered the world because of man's sin. And we know that we are under the curse of death because we are all sinners. George Bernard Shaw said, "The statistics of death are quite impressive. One out of one dies." The Bible agrees. It says, "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment. . ." (Heb. 9:27).

We know that through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection death has been conquered. It has been swallowed up in victory. We know that at death God's people go immediately into His presence. And we know that when Jesus returns to the earth the graves will be opened and our bodies will be resurrected. Now we can shout with the apostle Paul, "...thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 15:57).

But still there is a shroud of mystery surrounding death. Why did God allow death in the first place? We cannot understand why an undying God would make us subject to death.

The very existence of death will continue to be a mystery until we get to heaven. Then for the first time we shall understand, not only the mystery of suffering but the mystery of death also.

# The Mystery of Eternity

Third, the mystery of eternity will be cleared up in heaven! What kind of life exists beyond the grave? Today as never before people are seeking an answer to that question.

In recent years a number of scientists have done considerable research on death and dying. Their research is based on detailed interviews with people who were considered clinically dead but who recovered and told of their experiences. Perhaps you have read some of these findings in the book Life After Life, by Raymond Moody.

The death-bed experiences they report all indicate that there is a life after death, and that is a life of joy, rewards, and reunion. While these studies are fascinating and point up the intense interest in the life to come, they are of questionable value. They are more psychological than scientific or scriptural.

The only sure word we have concerning life after death comes from one source – the Bible. And even it is sketchy. However, the Bible describes heaven as a temple where we shall know the presence of God, a city where we shall know the protection of God, and a garden where we shall know the provision of God. And the Bible declares that we shall not only see our Savior face to face, but we shall also enjoy a glad reunion with our Christian friends and loved ones who have preceded us.

Still Paul says, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (I Corinthians 2:9). Weak language cannot bear the weight of eternal glory.

While the mysteries of suffering, death, and eternity will one day be solved – today we must be content to walk by faith. We find ourselves in the same position as Jesus' first apostles. At the height of His popularity many people turned from following Jesus because His teachings were so hard. He asked His disciples, "Will you also go away?" Peter replied, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

It comes down to that with us. There is nowhere else for us to go. If Jesus does not have the answers to the mysteries of life, there are none. We must either swim with Jesus or sink in despair. So with Sir Harry Lauder, cast your cares upon Christ. You will find Him sufficient to clear up the mystery of suffering, heaven, and eternity.

### → UNTROUBLED BY DEATH →

John 14:1-6

Death is always a troubling experience. No matter what the circumstances surrounding it may be, no matter how long you may have expected it, no matter how old the person may be, it is always distressing to learn that someone has died.

That's why we are surprised to hear Jesus say in a circumstance not too different from this "Let not your heart be troubled..." (John 14: 1). These words were spoken in the context of his own approaching death. Jesus had just told his disciples that he was going to die. For three years he had been their closest associate, their constant companion. They had forsaken everything—occupations, families, and friends—everything, in order to follow Him. Their hopes and dreams for all the future rested on him. Now He tells them He must die and go away but that they should not be troubled by it.

The word "troubled" means to be distressed, disturbed, agitated. It is the same word that is used to describe the deep sorrow of
Mary and Martha at the death of their brother Lazarus (John 11:33).
It is the same word that is used to describe the agitation of unbelievers at the preaching of the apostle Paul (Acts 17:8). Jesus is saying to His disciples, "I am going to die. I am going to be leaving you
now—but I do not want you to be disturbed, distressed, or agitated
over it."

How was that possible? We begin to understand when we hear Jesus out. Listen to His complete statement:

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know. Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me (John 14:1-6).

In these words, Jesus gives us the ingredients of a strong and sustaining faith. Three things are necessary if we are to be able to face the death of a loved one without being unduly distressed or troubled. We must have:

> Faith in a person. Faith in a place. Faith in a promise.

### Faith in a Person

The first essential for facing death is faith in a person. Jesus said, "You believe in God, believe also in me." Would it surprise you to know that neither Jesus nor the Bible ever argued the existence of God? They assume His reality. The Bible opens with the great affirmation, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Gen. 1: 1).

And thereafter His non-existence is never considered.

The Bible never deals with the subject of atheism except to say, "The fool has said in his heart, There is no God" (Psalm 14: 1).

The atheist is called a fool, because God is so evident. Abraham Lincoln said, "I can see how it might be possible for a man to look down upon the earth and be an atheist, but I cannot conceive how he could look up into the heavens and say that there is no God."

The heavens declare his glory and the firmament shows His handiwork. Any man who has eyes to see and a mind to reason knows there is a God. All creation testifies to his existence.

But it is not enough just to believe in God. The devils believe in God. Jesus said, "Believe also in me."

To believe in God is one thing. To believe in Christ is another. To believe in God makes one a deist. To believe in Christ makes one a Christian. To believe in God may mean that you believe only in a power that creates. To believe in Christ is to believe in a person who cares. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

Christ is God with skin on his face. Christ is the Messiah who came to bring us to God. Christ is the Saviour who came to die on the cross for our sins. Through Him, we can have salvation, life, and hope. As S. D. Gordon said, "Jesus is God spelling himself out in language that man can understand." A strong, sustaining faith begins with the person of Christ.

### Faith in a Place

Second, Jesus said that you need also to believe in a place. He said, "In my father's house are many mansions [rooms]: if it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." The place Jesus is talking about is heaven.

As a pastor, I'm often asked, "What is heaven like?" The Bible gives us a detailed description when John writes in Rev. 21:1-3, "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God."

John describes heaven in three ways. First, he calls it a "new heaven and a new earth." In the original language of the New Testament, there are two words for "new." One means "new in appearance." The other means "new in kind." It is the latter word that is used here. Heaven is not this old world patched up, renovated, or remodeled. It is a new kind of place. There will be no death in heaven. That's a new kind of place! There will be no suffering and no heartache and no pain in heaven. That's a new kind of place! There will be no tears in heaven. That's a new kind of place! There will be no partings in heaven. That's a new kind of place!

Second, he says that in heaven there will be "no more sea." The sea has always stood for mystery, turmoil, and separation. Before men developed sea-going vessels, the ocean was always a mystery. They looked out across the horizon, and they could imagine all kinds of monsters in the water. They even envisioned the end of the world out there. They believed that if you sailed far enough, you would drop off into nothingness. Since they could not sail the seas and explore the great beyond, they stood in awe before the ocean.

More than that, the ocean represented turmoil to them. They saw the waves dashing relentlessly against the shore day in and day out, week in and week out, year in and year out. The sea was never at peace, never calm, never still. To them, it represented the turmoil of life. When John thought of heaven, he thought of it as a place where the mysteries and the turmoils of this life will have vanished away.

But most of all the sea represented separation to John. When he penned these words, he was in exile on the isle of Patmos for preaching the gospel. For many years he had been pastor of the church of Ephesus. Now he had been arrested and sentenced to imprisonment on this island because of his faith. On a clear day he could walk along the seashore and peer out across the ocean, and in the distance he could see the mainland. In his mind, he could see his friends and the work he loved so very much. The only thing that stood between John and his beloved Christian friends was the ocean. The sea was a barrier.

When John thought of heaven, he said, "There will be no more sea there." The barriers of life will be removed. The things that separate us from God and our loved ones will be gone forever.

Third, he saw heaven "...as a bride adorned for her husband." A young lady is never more beautiful than on her wedding day. In all probability more preparation has gone into that appearance than any other in her lifetime. When she stands before the altar to be married, she is the personification of purity and beauty. When John thought of heaven, he thought of a bride dressed up on her wedding day.

What is heaven like? It is the most beautiful place the mind of God can conceive and the hand of God can create. It is a new kind of place with no sickness, or death, or sorrow, or pain. It is a place where the turmoils of life are no more. It is a place of unhindered and uninterrupted fellowship. It is a place of beauty beyond compare.

When we have faith in Christ, we know that heaven is going to be our home.

### Faith in a Promise

Third, we need to believe in the promise of Jesus. Jesus said, "And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there you may be also." That's a promise. You can bank on it. The world has not seen the last of Jesus Christ! He is coming again as he promised. He is the only rightful ruler and king of this universe, and He will one day return to the earth in power and glory. The blessed hope of every believer is in this victorious return of Jesus Christ.

When He comes again, He will receive us unto himself. What does this mean? When a Christian dies, his body is placed in the ground, and it returns to the dust from whence it came, but his spirit goes on to heaven to be with God.

Paul wrote, "To be absent from the body, is to be present [face to face] with the Lord" (II Cor. 5:8).

Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

And Paul said that he had "a desire to depart, and to be with Christ" (Phil. 1:23).

Then at the end of time when Jesus returns to the earth, the bodies of the dead shall be resurrected from the grave and reinhabited by the spirits that have been with God. Then we shall have new resurrected bodies like the resurrected body of Jesus. This means that life does not end at the cemetery. One day the cemetery is going to be the liveliest place on earth. It's where the action will be.

Then those of us who are fortunate enough to be alive when Jesus returns will be given a new glorified body, without having to go through the death experience. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, we shall all be transformed and changed. Then we shall be caught up in the clouds with them and with the Lord forever (I Thess. 4:13-18). This will all happen when Jesus comes again. We have His word on it.

Jesus concluded this teaching in verse six by saying: "I am the way"—without me there is no going; "I am the truth"—without me there is no knowing; "I am the life"—without me there is no growing.

Here then is God's prescription for a troubled, anxious, broken heart. Here are the ingredients of a strong and sustaining faith—belief in the Saviour, belief in heaven, and belief in the resurrection. Focus on them today, and heed Jesus' words.

#### CHAPTER SEVEN

### CHRISTIAN ASSURANCES = II Cor. 5:1-8

As the great Christian Scientist, Sir Michael Faraday, lay dying, a group of people gathered about his bed. A newspaper reporter said to him, "Sir Faraday, knowing that you are about to pass into eternity, what are your speculations about the great beyond?"

This magnificent Christian, with a heavenly glow on his face, turned to the reporter and said, "I know nothing about speculation, sir. My hope is built upon him. 'I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."

When we stand in the presence of death as we do today, we are not interested in speculations or in guesswork. We want some word of assurance about the life beyond.

God gives us a word of assurance when Paul writes, "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: if so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life. Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit. Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: (For we walk by faith, not by sight:) We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord" (II Corinthians 5:1-8).

These words were written against the backdrop of suffering, persecution, and the danger of death. They were written to give the Christian assurances about the resurrection and the life to come. There are three Christian assurances mentioned here that every Christian can know as he faces death and eternity. Paul begins with the word "know." It means to have an absolute and settled knowl-

edge. It describes a deep conviction of the soul. Our Christian hope is not characterized by "maybe" or "perhaps" or "I hope so." It is a matter of certainty.

There are three Christian assurances mentioned here that every Christian can have as he faces death and eternity. They are:

A knowledge that is sure.

A home that is superior.

A God who is our savior.

### A Durable Home

What do we know for certain? First, we know that when our physical body wears out in death, we have an eternal home in heaven that God has prepared for us. Paul uses two words that make this truth vivid. The first is the word "tabernacle." A tabernacle is a tent and an impermanent dwelling place. He used this figure to describe our physical body. Our body is the temporary home for our eternal spirit, and it is subject to decay and death. Bit by bit, day by day, it is wearing out. Eventually it will wear out completely and must then be laid aside in death.

The second word he uses is the word "dissolved." It is a very gentle word that means to fold up a tent and lay it aside. This is the word Paul uses to describe death for a Christian. What's it like to die? Since death first entered the world, people have been asking that question. Here Paul says that for a Christian death is not a dreadful experience at all. It is like gently folding up a tent, laying it aside, and moving into a new place.

What a beautiful description of death. Imagine a nomad who is traveling through a burning desert. He arrives at an oasis to spend the night, and the first thing he does is to unpack his camel, drive some stakes into the ground, and put up his tent. The next day he pulls up the stakes, takes down his tent, and moves on his way. That's what death is. It is moving from this life into God's durable home which he is preparing for us in the next world.

### A Desirable Hope

Second, we have a new home that is superior. The apostle Paul says that in this present body we groan (vs. 2 and 4). The word "groan" means "to sigh or moan." All of my life I have been very active in sports, but now that I am getting older, I find it more difficult to participate. While I still try, I can't run as fast or jump as high as I once did. When I get up in the morning, there are lots of sighs and groans.

Do you know what these sighs and groans mean? They mean that my tent is sagging. I am getting old, and my body is wearing out. One of these days it will wear out completely, and like an old tent, it will need to be laid aside in burial.

We sometimes think that we are in the land of the living on our way to the land of the dying, but the opposite is true. We are actually in the land of the dying and on our way to the land of the living. We all experience the decay of age.

But our new home will not be subject to decay. That is why it is not just acceptable. It is actually desirable.

# A Dependable Saviour

Third, we have a God who is our Saviour. You may wonder what assurances we have that this is true. How can we be sure that this is more than just a wistful dream?

Our assurance is in God. Paul says, "Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God." He is the one who has made all of this possible. His faithfulness and trustworthiness are the grounds of our confidence about the life beyond.

God has given us two assurances of the reality of our hope. The first is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The God who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up (II Cor. 4:14). The Bible describes Jesus as the "—firstfruits of them that slept." That means that the risen, glorified Jesus is the first of millions who will be given resurrection bodies such as He had on resurrection morning.

Second, God has given us the "earnest of the spirit." The word "earnest" is a legal, commercial term used to describe a deposit, a first installment, a down payment. The same word is used in modern Greek for an engagement ring. It is used here in the sense of a pledge or a guarantee. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life is God's pledge that we will one day have complete redemption.

The Holy Spirit is God's guarantee that He has prepared eternity for us. His Spirit is the first installment of future blessings.

Entertainer Lu Lu Roman was converted to Christ several years ago. In a television interview, she was asked how she knew that she was really one of God's children. She said, "I've got inside information." She had reference to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as a certainty of our complete redemption. We all have inside information that confirms our present salvation and our future hope.

These, then, are our Christian assurances. We have a durable home, a desirable hope, and a dependable Saviour. Therefore, we are confident that when we die, we shall be present with the Lord. To be absent from this body is to be face to face with the Lord in eternity. There is no in-between. At the moment of death, the Christian moves into the presence of the Lord.

Thus, our Christian hope is not built on speculation or wishful thinking. It is built on the dependability, the trustworthiness, of God himself. So we can face life and death with confidence and assurance because of who God is and what He has done.

#### CHAPTER EIGHT

### HOPE FOR THE HOPELESS

I Thess. 4:13-18

When Joseph Addison lay dying, he sent for his stepson who had lived a reckless, rebellious life. When Lord Warwick arrived, Addison said to him: "I have sent for you, son, that you may see the kind of peace a Christian can have even when he is dying."

There is a difference in the way Christians and non-believers face their own deaths. The difference is hope in Jesus Christ.

Paul voices this sustaining hope when he writes, "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words" (I Thessalonians 4:13-18).

In these verses, Paul shares with us three truths that give us hope. For a moment, ponder these with me. Through Christ, he gives us:

A new concept of death.

The certainty of the resurrection.

The prospects of a glad reunion.

# A New Concept of Death

First, Paul gives us a new concept of death. Paul describes the dead as "...them which are asleep..." The word "asleep" is the New Testament's favorite word for the death of a Christian. In fact, it is used thirteen times. What does this word mean?

Imagine a man coming home after a hard day's work. He sits down in his easy chair to rest and read the paper before the evening meal. After a few moments of relaxation, he dozes off to sleep. There is nothing dreadful or fearful about that. In fact, it is a welcomed and enjoyable experience. That's the word the Bible uses to describe the death of a Christian.

Catherine Marshall, in her helpful book, Beyond Ourselves, tells of a friend, Mrs. McDonald, whose teenage son died of diabetes a few months before insulin was discovered. She said her son suspected he was going to die and asked his mother, "Mother, what is it like to die? Mother, does it hurt?"

"I remember," she said, "that I fled to the kitchen, supposedly to attend to something on the stove. I leaned against the kitchen cabinet. Queer, I'll never forget certain tiny details, like the feel of my knuckle pressed hard against the smooth, cold surface, as I asked God how to answer my boy."

"God did tell me. Only He could have given me the answer to the hardest question that a mother can ever be asked. I knew—just knew—how to explain death to him. 'Kenneth,' I remember saying, 'you know how when you were a tiny boy, you used to play so hard all day that when night came, you would be too tired to undress—so you would tumble into Mother's bed and fall asleep? That was not your bed. It was not where you belonged. And you would only stay there a little while. In the morning, to your surprise, you would wake up and find yourself in your own bed in your own room. You were there because someone who loved you had taken care of you. Your father had come with his gentle, strong arms and carried you away."

"So I told Kenneth that death is like that. We just wake up some morning and find ourselves in another room—our own room, where we belong. We shall be there because God loves us even more than our human fathers and takes care of us just as tenderly."

And Mrs. McDonald said, "Kenneth never had any fear of dying after that."

What's it like to die? Does it hurt? No, not if you are a Christian. It is like going to sleep and waking up in your own room in your father's house.

# A New Certainty of Resurrection

Second, Paul gives us the certainty of resurrection. He says, "If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him" (v. 14).

This verse expresses the certainty of the resurrection. When Paul describes what happened to Jesus, he does not say that Jesus went to sleep. He uses the old word, "death." That's because on the cross Jesus suffered the agony, heartache, and misery of all our sins. He died that we might know sleep.

In I Corinthians 15:20, the apostle Paul describes Jesus as the "firstfruits of them that slept." The word "firstfruits" is used as an agricultural term. It describes those first heads of grain that get ripe in the field in late spring or early summer. These were very special to the Jews. They were the beginning of the harvest and the pledge of more to come. If there were no firstfruits, there would be no harvest later on. If there was no beginning, there would be no reason to expect an end. These were so important that they were offered as a sacrifice to God.

Jesus is the firstfruits of the resurrection. He is the beginning of the resurrection, and he is God's pledge to us that there shall be a general resurrection at the end of time. So if anyone should ask you, "When is the resurrection going to begin?" you should tell him, "It has already started. It started when Jesus was raised from the dead." And if anyone should ask you, "How can I be sure there is going to be a resurrection?" you tell him, "You can be sure, because Jesus was raised from the dead."

The blessed hope of the believer is that Jesus is going to return to the earth. When he does, the graves in the cemeteries will be opened and the dead shall be resurrected just as Jesus was resurrected. If we are fortunate enough to be alive when he comes again, our bodies will then be transformed without having to go through the death experience. We have the great certainty of this great resurrection because of what Jesus did and said.

### The Prospects of a Glad Reunion

Finally, Paul gives us the prospects of a glad reunion. "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (v. 17).

There are two phrases in that verse that should be noted. First, the phrase "with them" means that we shall be with our loved ones forever. Secondly, we shall be "with the Lord." Both speak of the glad reunion we shall experience in heaven. We shall be with our loved ones, and we shall be with the Lord forever. This gives us hope and comfort.

One of the last letters from the pen of the well-beloved and famous minister, F. B. Meyer, reads like this: "I have just been told, much to my surprise, that I have but a few days to live. It may be, by the time that this reaches you, I shall have entered the palace. You need not bother to answer. I shall see you in the morning. Yours very truly, F. B. Meyer."

All of God's people can say that. It may be that before those of us here today ever meet again, some of us will have passed beyond. Never mind, we shall meet again—in the morning.

When Jesus comes again, the graves shall be opened, the dead shall be raised, and the living shall be transformed. Then we shall be together and be with Him forever. Are you ready for His coming? You can be prepared by inviting Him to come into your life to be your Saviour and Lord.

Through Jesus, then, we have a new concept of death. We have the certainty of the resurrection and the confirmation of a glad reunion. He gives hope to the hopeless.

### YOU CAN GO TO HIM

(The Death of a Child)

II Samuel 12:16-23

George Buttrick once said that life is essentially a series of events to be borne and lived through, rather than a series of intellectual riddles to be played with and solved. It is important that we remember his words at a time like this. Time and time again you will ask the question, "Why has this happened?" In all probability, no answer will come. The heavens will seem as brass. The silence of God will be deafening.

It is just as well! Even if an answer came, it would not satisfy. Answers do not heal broken hearts. They do not soothe the ache and loneliness that we feel in the hour of death. God is in the business of sustaining, not explaining. He has never promised to tell us why things happen. But he has promised to go with us through those experiences and to enable us to be victorious over them. If you stay close to him, you will discover that is enough.

The really important question when you lose a child is not "Why has this happened?" but "How can I bear up under it? How do I endure the heartache? How can I keep this from defeating me?"

God's word gives us the answer. It allows us to walk through a similar experience with David, the king of Israel, and see what sustained him.

David had a little child who became very ill. For many days the child held on to the slender thread of life.

They were days of agony and anxiety for David. You know something of that same experience. He sat in constant vigil over his little child. He went without food or sleep for days. He prayed and fasted with the hope that the child might live. Nothing, not the demands of his high office, nor the appeals of his servants, nor the needs of his own life, could take him away from his little child.

When the boy finally died, David's servants were greatly distressed. They did not know how to break the news to him, nor how he would respond to it. They even feared that in his despair he might take his own life. As they were trying to decide how to tell him the child was dead, he saw them whispering. He asked, "Is the child dead?" and they answered, "Yes, the child is dead."

Then, to their amazement, David arose, washed himself, changed his clothes, and went immediately to the house of God and worshipped. When he was through worshipping, he returned to the palace and asked for a meal. His servants were bewildered. They could not understand why he had fasted and prayed and wept while the child was alive, but now that the child was dead, he was resuming the normal activities of his life. As he ate his meal, the servants asked for an explanation.

David's answer is worth remembering. In II Sam. 12:22-23, he said, "While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell whether God will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me."

In this experience, we can learn from David some things that will help us in dealing with and overcoming the deep sorrow of losing a little child. We can:

Seek God in worship. Accept death as a part of life. Focus on hope.

### Seek God in Worship

The first thing that helped David, and will help us, was to seek God in worship. When David learned that his child was dead, the first thing he did was go to the house of God to worship. He did not curse God, nor question God, nor doubt God. He worshipped God.

God had always been the source of David's strength. He enabled him to stand up to life, and it was through worship that he entered into the presence of God and drew from that mighty strength. David confessed this fact when he wrote, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46: 1).

He wrote again, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:1-2).

For three years, Martin Neimoller survived the horrors of Dachau—the smells of burning human flesh and the sights of walking dead men. For three years, this German pastor who dared to defy Adolf Hitler was kept in solitary confinement in the world's worst concentration camp.

"How could you stand it without losing your sanity?" an interviewer asked Pastor Neimoller years later over a Chicago radio station.

"A man doesn't realize how much he can stand until he is put to the test," Neimoller answered confidently. Then he said, "You can stand far more than you think you can. You are much stronger than you think you are...if God is dwelling in your life."

The key is God dwelling in you. All the water in the world cannot sink a ship unless the water gets inside the ship. All the sorrows of the world cannot sink you into despair so long as your life is filled with God. God strengthens us for life, and that's why worship helps us to live victoriously through this experience.

# Accept Death as a Part of Life

The second thing that helped David and will help us was to accept death as a part of life. When the child was dead, David accepted it. He realized that he could not bring the child back. Life had to continue. There were other people who needed him. So he accepted the fact that his child was dead and plunged back into the task of living and serving.

Death is a part of life. As soon as we are born, we are old enough to die. We know from the very moment of birth that death awaits us sooner or later. The only questions are when and how?

Life is hard. It is filled with suffering and heartache and death. We must realize this and accept it, or life will defeat us.

The real question is, "How will we accept life?" There are three attitudes open to us. The joy of life depends on which one we take. There is the way of rebellion, the way of resignation, or the way of reconciliation. We can grimly and bitterly accept life, and we are the losers. We can blindly and childishly accept life, and we are none the better. Or we can reconcile ourselves to suffering and heartache and the fact that life must go on, and we can be the victor.

### Focus on Hope

The final thing that sustained David and will sustain us is to focus on our hope. He said concerning his dead child, "Can I bring him back? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me."

This is your hope also. Nothing in all the world can bring the child back, but you can go to him. There is more to life than you see here today. Death looks so final, but it is not the end. There is glorious life beyond. There is a heaven, and little children have a place in it.

Jesus assured us of this when He said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God" (Mark 10: 14).

Do we need more assurance than that? Heaven is populated by little children and those who come to God with their kind of honesty and humility and faith.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge expressed this hope beautifully when he wrote to a friend who had sustained a similar loss. He stated, "To my friend, in recollection of his son and mine, who by the grace of God, have the privilege of being boys together throughout eternity."

Jim Elliott, the martyred missionary, said, "I must not think it strange if God takes in youth those whom I would have left till old age. God is populating heaven, and He must not be restricted to old men and women."

I once heard of a couple who, like you, lost a little child in death. In response to this tragedy, they said, "We have determined not to ask why until we get into the presence of the one who can give us the answer."

I encourage you to do the same. Keep believing in and walking with God, and keep looking to heaven. These things can sustain you in a time like this.

#### CHAPTER TEN

### THE LESSONS OF DEATH =

Psalm 39:4-7

Robert M. Herhold says in his book, Learning to Die—Learning to Live, "Death is that final separation from all that we have worked for, and that we have built up, all that is near and dear to us. It is too bad that dying is the last thing we do. Because it could teach us so much about living."

Death can teach us much about life, and the remarkable thing is that it does not have to be our own death. Even the loss of a friend can teach us much about meaningful living.

David expressed this truth when he wrote in Psalm 39:4-7, "Lord, make me know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am. Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Surely every man walketh in a vain show: surely they are disquieted in vain: he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them. And now, Lord, what wait I for? My hope is in thee."

When David penned these words, he was bowed down by distress and sorrow. The hand of God weighed heavily upon him (v. 10). In his sorrow, he was tempted to complain against God for what he was experiencing, but instead he manifested self-control and began to think about the brevity of life and the certainty of death. Then he asked God to make him keenly aware of how frail his life was so that he might make the most of it.

Three times in these four verses he used the word "vain" or "vanity" to describe our existence. He says:

Every man at his best state is altogether vanity (v. 5). Every man walketh in a vain show (v. 6). They are disquieted in vain (v. 6). Then he adds: Surely every man is vanity (v. 11).

The word "vain" literally means "as a breath." Our life is frail and fleeting. It is as a whispering breeze and as a drifting fog. It is like a handbreadth. A handbreadth was a small measurement of about four inches or the width of your hand. It took nine of them to make a yard. Our life is like that. In the sight of God, it is only an inconsequential moment.

With life so uncertain, David realizes that it is futile to trust in wealth and to spend all of one's time accumulating material possessions for someone else to spend. He concluded that our real security is in God.

The truth David proclaims is that the frailty of life and the certainty of death ought to teach every one of us to make the most of the time we have. The very thought of death ought to teach us three important lessons about life.

We ought to make the most of every day. It is fatal to trust in wealth. The only real security is God.

# Make The Most of Every Day

First, the fact of death ought to teach us to live each day to its fullest. Since life is so fleeting and uncertain, we must not presume on tomorrow. We must make the most of every day we have, for this is all we have and need.

This means in part that happiness is found in the little things of life. For many people, happiness is more of a dream than a reality. They are always grasping after it but never reaching or possessing it.

If we are wise, we will realize that happiness is found all around us every day in the little things of life. Things like a quiet dinner with our family, a cup of coffee with a friend, reading a good book, meaningful work, a brisk walk through the woods, or real worship. If we do not find happiness in these things, we will most likely never find it all.

Grantland Rice once said, "Don't hurry, don't worry, and don't forget to smell the flowers."

This is good advice. Life was intended to be sipped, not gulped, and if we aren't careful, we will rush through it so fast that we miss it altogether.

Making the most of every day means that we should keep good relationships with other people. Christopher Morley once said, "If we discovered that we had only five minutes left to say all we wanted to say, every telephone booth would be occupied by people calling other people to stammer that they loved them. Why wait until the last five minutes?"

It is tragic that we so often go through life without expressing our deep feelings for other people. Death should teach us to so live before God and others that when they are gone, or we are gone, there will be no regrets over lost opportunities or broken relationships. If we are wise, we will remember the shortness of life and the nearness of death, and we will live so that we have no regrets. We will make the most of every day.

# The Futility of Trusting in Wealth

Second, the fact of death ought to teach us the futility of trusting in wealth. Several years ago I was called to the bedside of a friend who had just learned that he had a terminal illness with only a few months to live. He told me that the night before he had taken a legal pad and listed all of his assets on it. He then said, "It took only six pages to list everything that I own. When you put it all down on paper and then look at it from the end of life instead of what you thought was the middle of life, it doesn't amount to much."

Have you listed all of your assets in the light of eternity? Jesus once asked, "What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt. 16:26).

The answer to these questions is obvious. There is nothing we can give in exchange for our soul, and if we gain the whole world and lose our soul, we have gained nothing. We have lost everything!

It is easy today to become so caught up in making a living that we fail to make a life. We can become so preoccupied with accumulating wealth that we become spiritual beggars. I'm reminded of the swift exchange between two prominent, well-respected Englishmen. One said, "How is it with your soul?"

His friend replied, "My soul? I have been so busy lately that I had almost forgotten that I have a soul."

Don't let that happen to you. You cannot control the length of your life, but you can have something to say about its width and depth. You can give yourself to those things that are of eternal importance.

All of us ought to remember that we brought nothing into this world, and we shall carry nothing out. As martyred missionary Jim Elliott said, "No man is a fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

Death ought to teach us the futility of trusting in wealth.

# Our Hope Is in God

Third, the fact of death ought to teach us that our only real security is in God. While our life is as a breath, God is eternal. He completely transcends time. It is only to Him that we can turn for everlasting life. Our hope is in his mercy, his forgiveness, and his salvation.

I recently traveled to a little country cemetery to bury a dear friend. The little community where it was located is like thousands of others. It was once alive with people. Today, an isolated farmhouse punctuates the horizon here and there. The old school has long since been torn down. The little country church is still there, but no one meets in it anymore. The cemetery is overgrown and unkempt. As I walked among the tombstones and read the epitaphs, I was reminded again of the words of the psalmist when he said, "As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more" (Psalm 103:15-16).

I was almost tempted to despair when I remembered the words of Jesus, "I am the resurrection, and the life: He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26).

This is our God-given hope. Jesus Christ, His son, died for our sins. He was buried in Joseph's tomb. On the third day, he was raised from the dead and now lives forevermore. Because he lives, we shall live also. Our hope and security is in Jesus Christ alone.

The poet John Richard Moreland expressed this truth when he wrote:

The hands of Christ Seem very frail. For they were broken By a nail. But only they Reach heaven at last Whom these frail, broken Hands hold fast.

In my message, I have sought to challenge you to learn three lessons that death can teach us. We ought to live each day to its fullest. It is futile to trust in wealth. And our only real hope of salvation and everlasting life is in God. Put your faith and trust in Christ today. He alone can give hope to our frail and uncertain lives.

# GOD'S INSEPARABLE LOVE (Death by Suicide)

Romans 8:35-39

Of all the sorrows we can experience, there's none quite so difficult as the sorrow we feel when a person takes his own life. Family and friends alike are left not only to suffer all the normal emotions that accompany the loss of a loved one, but we are also left with many unanswered questions. We wonder, "Why did this happen? Were there signals we should have seen? Did we offer all the love and support we should have? Could we have done anything to prevent it?"

There are of course no final answers to these questions. That is one thing that makes this experience so hard to endure. Our only hope at a time like this is to look to God for strength and comfort. He has promised us that nothing can ever separate us from His loving care.

Paul expresses this beautifully when he wrote Romans 8:35-39: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, for His sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus the Lord" (Romans 8:35-39).

In this time of shock and sorrow, it will strengthen you if you will remember and really believe that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

The immediate problem that confronts all of us is, "How are we to react to this tragedy?" I want to offer three suggestions to you:

- ·Be compassionate and understanding
- ·Hold on to hope
- ·Give yourself to God

# Judge Not Lest Ye Be Judged

First, we must guard against the temptation to become

judgmental and condemning. We must be careful that simple answers are not given for complex problems. We need to respond

with compassion and understanding.

After all, no one knows the problems he faced or the pressures he endured. We do not know how many valiant battles he may have fought and won before he lost this one particular battle. Each one of us probably has a final breaking point. Life puts far more pressure on some of us than it does on others. Some people have more stamina than others. Knowing this should prompt us to love and sympathy and not to condemnation.

And besides it is not fair that all the good acts and impulses of a person's life should be forgotten or blotted out by one final tragic

act.

# Hold On To Hope

Second, we should hold on to hope. One of the distressing questions that always comes at a time like this is, "Can a person take his own life and still go to heaven? Can God forgive us when we have taken our own life? Is there any hope left?"

The idea has persisted for a long time that taking one's own life is the unpardonable sin. This belief has grown out of the idea that sins must be forgiven on earth to be forgiven in heaven. But that is not true. Do you suppose that Almighty God who has forgiven us in life will not likewise forgive us in death? Granted, taking one's own life is wrong, but it is not the unpardonable sin.

Our salvation is not based on the way we die any more than it is based on the way we live. It is determined by our relationship to Jesus Christ. The moment we receive Him as our Savior and Lord, our eternal salvation is fixed. If we believe in Christ as Savior when we die, we are saved. If not, we are lost (John 3:16-18). The manner

of our death does not enter into the picture.

Paul, in an effort to assure us that nothing can separate us from God's love and purpose, lists some experiences that can cause us to doubt God's love. Among these are life (which is filled with many failures and disappointments) and death (with its apparent finality) and the unseen spiritual powers all about us. Paul lays all of this aside. He affirms that nothing can frustrate God's purpose for your life.

I repeat, it will strengthen you if you will remember and really believe that nothing, not even death - neither the fact of it nor the manner of it, can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

#### Examine Your Life

Third, this is a time when we should examine our own lives carefully. It is a Christian conviction that life is a gift from God. Therefore, it is good and it is sacred. It is wrong not only to waste your life quickly, but it is wrong also to waste it by degrees and to waste it on those things which ultimately are not worthwhile. So, today, we should examine our lives to make sure we are giving ourselves to those things which are highest and best.

And we ought to examine our lives to make sure we are building a strong character that can withstand the pressures that life sometimes imposes upon us. A tree must have roots. And the taller the tree, the deeper the roots must be. Otherwise, it can be toppled by the wind. A building must have a foundation. And the taller the building, the stronger the foundation must be or it cannot stand the stress of time. It is the same with us. The greater the outer pressures of life become, the stronger inner braces we must have, and Jesus Christ is the only adequate one. We must see to it that our lives are filled with faith, hope, and love so that they can withstand the pressures of life without collapsing.

Someone has said, "Given a hub, a person can take a surprising number of shocks and bumps on the outer rim without sustaining permanent damage." If God is the hub of your life, you'll be able to stand much more without collapsing. If God isn't your hub, watch out! The rocks of life may very well wreck you.

The apostle Paul once described the troubles, hardships, persecutions, and pressures that he faced in daily living. But because of his faith and his hope in Jesus Christ he was sustained by God's grace. He said that even though the outward man was perishing, yet the inward man was being renewed day by day (II Cor. 4:16). And he said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). The same thing can be true of us.

Walter Winchell was a famous radio news commentator during World War II. Once after a particularly dark week during which the Port of Singapore fell, he closed his broadcast with this sentence, "Singapore has fallen, but the Rock of Ages stands."

That is our hope today. You probably feel as though your whole world has fallen. But remember that the Rock of Ages stands. Christ is still alive! He will comfort, strengthen, and sustain you if you will look to Him. And nothing can ever separate you from His love.

### LIVING WISELY

Psalms 90:12

Luther Rice, pioneer missionary to India, wrote in his personal journal of 1836: "The Lord, in His mercy, has brought me to the beginning of another year. I think I have made some little progress in religion the past year, but far less than I ought. God grant I may do better, should life be preserved through this year also. I think it right to plan, act, and labor, as if I might have thirty years for service yet before me; for even in that period, I should not have reached the age of my ancestors: but also so to live, plan, act, and labor, as though I might die soon, any day or hour."

When Rice wrote these lines he had no way of knowing that he had only nine months to live. He died September 25, 1836.

This death today reminds all of us of the need to live with an awareness that life is uncertain and that we all have an appointment with death. The psalmist taught us this when he wrote, "So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Psalm 90:12).

In this prayer the psalmist is asking the Lord to help us to remember that our days are not long on this earth so that we may make the most of them — that we may live wisely. There are three things that we must be aware of if we are going to live wisely:

- God is eternal
- Life is transient
- ·Preparation is urgent

### The Eternal Nature of God

First, the wise person is aware that God is eternal. This prayer is breathed against the backdrop of the eternal nature of God. The writer begins this psalm by saying, "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or even before thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting thou art God."

He begins by claiming that God not only is but has always been and He always will be. God is eternal. Some people say that they have a hard time believing this truth. They say that they can't believe in anything that has no beginning and no end.

But we believe in time, It is inconceivable to us that there was ever a time when time did not exist. And we cannot conceive of time ever coming to an end. It always has been and will always be.

And we believe in space — space without beginning or end. If there is a beginning to space, where is it? If there is an end to space, where is it? And if we found the beginning or end of space, what would be on the other side of it?

If we can believe in time without beginning or end, and space without beginning or end, surely we can believe in God without beginning or end. God is eternal. The wise person believes that God is, and was, and evermore shall be.

### The Frailty of Man

Second, the wise person is aware of man's brief time in this world. Over against the eternal nature of God, the psalmist pictures the frailty of man.

He uses several analogies in verses 4-9 to describe the brevity and frailty of life. First, he compares our life to a watch in the night. In ancient days cities had walls built around them for protection. Sentries stood watch on the walls every hour of the night to guard the city against an approaching enemy. A watch was a four-hour shift of sentry duty at night.

To a soldier on duty the long dark hours before dawn may have seemed like an eternity, but they really passed quickly. Our life is like that. When we are young and look forward, it seems as though tomorrow will never come. As we grow older and look back, we cannot believe how fast the years have passed.

Second, life is described as a story. In the days before the printed page, most teaching was done by telling stories. A story always had a beginning, an end, a moral, and it was quickly told. Our lives are like a story. They are not without meaning and purpose. They are often filled with much drama. But they soon come to end — and sometimes it is a surprise ending.

Third, life is pictured as a dream. Sometimes when we are dreaming it seems as though it takes forever for a dream to take place. Those who study dreams say that usually a dream lasts only a few seconds and then it is over.

Fourth, life is compared to a flood. I once lived in the hill country of Texas where flash floods were common. Several times we went to bed at night with no expectation of danger only to awaken the next day to learn that the rivers had flooded and homes and lives had been swept away before the people could be warned. Floods can come so suddenly and with such great fury that a life and its work can be swept away in a moment.

Finally, life is described as grass and flowers. They both flourish for a few days and then they wither and vanish away.

### The Urgency of Preparing

Finally, it teaches us the urgency of preparing. It is in the light of the eternal nature of God and the brevity of man's life that the psalmist breathes this prayer, "So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." This experience of death today reminds us again that God is eternal and that life is brief and it is urgent that we make the most of every moment.

Sybil Arms expresses this truth in her poem So Brief Our Days:

So brief our days, so very brief
Like an autumn rose with its falling leaf,
A moment's light, a glance of sun
And then our pilgrimage is done.
As the rainbow fades in the summer sky
As the green grass flourishes to die
This moment's triumph, too, will wane
And none shall call it back again.
Write quickly, then, while the candle glows
A little while and the book will close,
Go carve your figure of renown
For soon you must lay your chisel down.
Use well this hour's joy, its griefFor life is brief, so very brief!

I once read on the flyleaf of a Bible these words: "Only one life, twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last." This little verse reminds us that life won't last forever. So we must invest our lives in that which counts.

So with the psalmist we pray today, "Lord, teach us to so number our days that we may apply our heart unto wisdom."

#### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# A WOMAN WHO NEEDS NO EULOGY (A Godly Woman)

Proverbs 31:30

When Isabel Coleman, longtime missionary to China, died, her memorial service was conducted by several of the people she had won to Christ. A Chinese man read a brief history of Miss Coleman's life in Chinese. When he concluded, he said in English, "For those who did not know Miss Coleman, no words are adequate to describe her life. For those who knew her, no words are necessary."

I feel that same way today. We are here to commemorate the life of a woman who needs no eulogy. When a person has lived such a godly life, there is nothing we can add to it. Her eulogy comes naturally and spontaneously from what she was and what she did.

The Bible teaches us this in its picture of the ideal woman in Proverbs 31:10-31. She is described as trustworthy, industrious, compassionate, and wise. Then it says, "Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain; but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised."

This is the most important thing about her. She gives priority to the eternal and spiritual values of life. She fears God, that is, she has a deep reverence for and awe of God. She values Him above both charm and beauty. She knows that favor (charm) can be deceitful. It can cover up the real person. We are all such marvelous actors and actresses that we can fool people by our actions.

And she knows that beauty is vain. The word vain literally means "as a breath." Beauty is fleeting. It is like the air we breathe. It quickly fades away. But God is eternal. The woman who reveres and worships Him shall be praised. Her praise, her eulogy, will come from three sources:

- The family she loved
- The works she did
- The God she served

### Eulogized By Her Family

First, a godly woman is eulogized by her family. The writer of Proverbs says, "Her children arise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her." A woman can have no greater eulogy than that of a loving family.

L. R. Scarborough, who served as president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, told of an inquiring college student who came to him after a series of evangelistic meetings to say, "I have heard all of your sermons on the deity of Christ, the inspiration of the scriptures, and the atonement, and I can answer the logic of every one of them. But a few weeks ago as I stood with our mourning family by the grave of my invalid mother, and as loving friends lowered her crippled little body into the ground I said, 'I want that which made my mother what she was."

There is no greater argument for the Christian faith than that of a godly life. Someone has said, "One good mother is worth a hundred school teachers and an ounce of a mother is worth a pound of parson." The praise of a loving family is one of the greatest of all eulogies.

### **Eulogized By Her Works**

Second, a godly woman is eulogized by the works she did. Again the writer of Proverbs says, "Give her the fruit of her hand, and let her own works praise her in the gates" (Proverbs 31:31).

The city gates in the Old Testament were equivalent to our city hall. It was the place where people met and transacted business. There a person was known for what he really was. Our works always reveal our true character. Somewhere in his essays Emerson says, "See how the mass of men worry themselves into nameless graves, while here and there a great unselfish soul forgets himself into immortality." A life of unselfish service is a eulogy in itself.

Dorcas's life was an example of this kind of service. She was a disciple of Jesus Christ and a member of the early New Testament church. Her life was characterized by good works and deeds of mercy. When she died, her friends came to prepare her body for burial. Then someone remembered that the apostle Peter was nearby and sent for him with the hopes that he might be able to raise her from the dead.

When Peter arrived he found many widows standing around the body of Dorcas, weeping and holding coats and garments that she had made for them while she was alive. What she had done spoke of what she was. Her works eulogized her.

Her life is a beautiful example to all of us. It suggests that we all ought to be something — a disciple; do something — good works, and leave something — the memory of loving service. When we have lived a life of service, our good works are the only eulogy we need.

### Eulogized By Her God

Third, a godly woman is eulogized by the Lord. That's what we have here. The eternal God who made the heavens and the earth pauses in this scripture to praise this woman.

Every true follower of Christ can anticipate God's commendation. When we have loved God devotedly and followed Him faithfully, we can expect one day to hear Him say. "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

The Lord always knows who and what we are. The scriptures say," ... the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him" (II Chron. 16:9).

The Lord knew that Enoch walked with him and did not hesitate to say that Enoch pleased him (Heb. 11:5). The Lord knew that Abraham believed him and did not hesitate to say that Abraham was his friend (James 2:23). The Lord knew that David loved him and did not hesitate to say that David was a man after His own heart (Acts 13:22).

The Lord knows us also. And he will gladly attest to our character in eternity. So, a godly woman really needs no eulogy. Her whole life is a eulogy. It speaks for itself. We cannot add to it nor take away from it.

Concerning the life of this godly woman, we can say, for those who did not know her, no words are adequate to describe her life. For those who did know her, no words were necessary.

#### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## → THE GOD WHO CARES → Psalm 23

By any standard, the 23rd Psalm is among the greatest writings of all times. It has brought more comfort, more strength, and more hope to people in times of sorrow than any other words ever penned. Listen again to this timeless and timely message from God: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

This Psalm is a great affirmation about God. Clearly its importance is in what it tells us about Him. David declares, "The Lord is to me what a shepherd is to his sheep." That may not mean much to us, but to those ancient people of the Eastern world who first heard it, it was a marvelous declaration. Shepherds had a very special relationship to their sheep. They knew them individually. They stayed with them constantly. And they provided for every need of their life.

Just so, David says, "The Lord knows me, loves me, provides for me, walks with me, guides me, protects me, and He will eventually bring me safely to his eternal house." In short, God cares for me in life, in death, and in eternity.

In the sorrowful experience of death we need to know and be assured of God's love and care. Nothing else can help us through the dark and gloomy experiences of life like faith in Him. Look for a moment with me at Psalm 23 and discover three important truths about God's care.

- . He cares for us in life
- ·He cares for us in death
- ·He cares for us in eternity

### Our Everyday Needs

First, in beautiful imagery David describes how God cares for us in life. He makes us to lie down in green pastures. He leads us beside the still waters. He restores our soul, and He leads us in the paths of righteousness. In these words he is describing God's care for us in all of the normal events of life — eating, sleeping, walking, working. He is the God of the workday as well as the God of the weekend. He cares for us continually.

It is so easy to forget that in our world of over-crowded calendars. In the days of our youth, in the days of our health, in days of prosperity, we tend to think that we are sufficient within ourselves. We may feel we do not really need God. Then tragedy strikes like lightning, and we are again reminded that in God we live and move and have our being.

The God of heaven cares for us in all of life. He is not sitting out on the rim of the universe unconcerned and uninvolved with his creation. He did not wind up the universe like an eight-day clock and then leave it to run by itself. He is vitally interested in all of the activities of our lives. And while we may be more aware of our needs of him today, and more sensitive to his presence in these moments, He is never far from any one of us. He marks the fall of every sparrow. He numbers the hairs on every head. He knows and cares for your every need.

### Our Emergency Needs

He not only cares for us in life, He also cares for us in the dark and gloomy experiences of death. Life is not all green pastures and still waters. Sometimes the green pastures become rough and rocky hills. Sometimes the still waters become stormy and turbulent seas. No one forever basks in the sunshine of the mountaintop. Sometimes we must walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

Where is God in the dark and gloomy experiences of life? Does He stop on the edge of the valley of the shadow of death and send us on to face it alone? No! David declares that even in the midst of these experiences God is with us.

He says, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (v. 4). God does not promise us escape from the troubles and sorrows of life, but He does offer us His presence. We must go through them, but He goes with us. There is no avoidance of the valley, but there is a glorious confidence that He will accompany us through it. You can be sure that in none of the dark and gloomy experiences of life will God desert you. He will not let you down.

Charles Allen, in his little book All Things Are Possible Through Prayer, has a chapter in which he talks about the nature of God. In this chapter he suggests three things about God.

First, God never lets us off. When we sin, God chastens us for our wrong. He doesn't close His eyes to our evil and pretend that it doesn't exist.

Second, God never lets us go. Even though we may rebel against Him, drift away from Him, and even try to wash our hands of Him, God continues to seek after us and call us back to Himself. Third, God never lets us down. No matter what happens He will never leave us nor forsake us. Think of that for a moment: He never lets us off, He never lets us go, and He never lets us down!

What a comfort and strength this is. And even now, if you will be still, you can sense the presence of the shepherd with you.

### Our Eternal Needs

David is not through yet. He goes on to declare: "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

He is declaring that God not only cares for us in life and in death, but also in eternity. With these verses the image changes from the care of the shepherd to the bounty of a host. We are no longer sheep in the pasture; we are guests in the palace. And in equally beautiful imagery, he describes how God provides abundantly for every need we have there. Then he closes this wonderful affirmation by saying, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (v. 5).

Jesus substantiated this claim by saying, "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2). And the Apostle affirmed it when he said, "For we know if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (II Cor. 5:1).

Nothing can sustain us in the dark hours of life like believing in a God who cares for us in life and in death and in eternity. All the promises that are set forth in this psalm belong to you if the Lord is your shepherd. Claim Him and claim them today by faith in Jesus Christ, who is the Good Shepherd (John 10:14). He will not fail you — ever.

## → THE LIFE BEYOND → Rev. 14:13

It is the teaching of the Bible that life does not end at the grave. There is an eternal spirit and image of God in us that cannot be destroyed by the death of the body.

In an anthology, The Spirit Of Man, edited by Whit Burnett, there appears a section from an unpublished book by a distinguished scientist, Anthony Standen, which expresses this truth beautifully: "The soul, then, is something which is not destroyed by the death of the body...a man who has lost an arm or a leg has his soul just the same, and his soul is not harmed by the loss. A wheel chair case, from polio, can go home to be president of the U. S. It often happens that people suffering from a serious disease are cheerful, courageous, friendly, loving — in other words they have splendid souls, though their bodies may be wasting away and even approaching death...some things can harm the body and even destroy it...but they do not harm the soul at all. How then can they destroy it?"

John must have had this truth in mind when he wrote, "And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, write, blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, sayeth the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them" (Rev. 14:13).

Obviously, this is a view of death from the other side. Viewed from our vantage point, death appears to be dreadful, defeating, and devastating. But from God's vantage point it is altogether different. He calls the dead "blessed." That word literally means "happy," "to be congratulated," "fortunate." Far from being pitied, he tells us that those who die with faith in the Lord Jesus are to be envied.

Why is this? Because from henceforth, from now on, they rest from their labors and their works follow them.

John Milton saw this when he described death as "the golden key that opens the palace of eternity." He saw it as the doorway into the marvelous life beyond. Because it is an entrance into eternal life, it becomes a blessed and fortunate experience for God's people. Death, then, for God's people is the doorway.

- The doorway to rest
- The doorway to reward
- The doorway to resurrection

### Doorway To Rest

John says that death is the doorway to rest from our labors. The word labor describes a beating, a wearing out from work, a wearisome toil. It suggests to us that life is often very hard. It can be full of difficulties, disappointments and disease. In the play, Death of a Salesman, by Arthur Miller, Uncle Ben says to Willy Loman, "Life is a jungle, Willy, be hard. Some go into the jungle and find diamonds. Others get caught by tigers. Life is a jungle, Willy, be hard!"

We all encounter those moments when life is like a jungle — full of terrors, struggles, sickness, and pain. And it is easy to grow weary of the struggle and long for rest and relief.

Death is the doorway into that rest for God's people. We need to thank God for death. There are times when a sick man needs to die like a tired man needs to sleep. We need to lay our burden down and to be at rest.

The word "rest" that appears here (Rev. 14:13) is a beautiful word. It means to be at ease, to be refreshed. It suggests an end to the toils and the tribulations of life. This is what Jesus promised to us when he said, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30). In this world of chaos and trouble, we can know rest.

But there is a greater and more complete rest for us when we go to be with the Lord. It is the rest of heaven and the presence of God. And those who have laid their burdens down and entered into it are to be congratulated. They are truly fortunate.

The great evangelist D. L. Moody once said, "One of these days you will read in the newspaper that D. L. Moody is dead. But don't you believe it. I will be more alive then than I have ever been before."

### Doorway To Reward

Death is not only the doorway to rest but also the doorway to reward. John says here, "...and their works do follow them." We are all making a record on earth. We carry the record of our life with us into eternity. By the lives that we live, the words that we say, and the deeds that we do, we are laying up for ourselves treasures in heaven. Jesus said if we give a cup of cold water to a little child in His name we will in no wise lose our reward (Matt. 10:42).

The Bible tells us that God will not forget our works and labor of love which we have done in His name as we minister to others (Heb. 6:10). All of these things are a part of our permanent record that we shall carry into eternity.

At the death of his mother, John J. McAller said, "I found a friend's thought apt and consoling: You can't weep for people who have left more in life than they have taken out."

We all leave something in this life. Our influence and our testimony, good or bad, remain long after we have gone. But while we leave something behind, we also take our record with us. Our works follow us. They accompany us to the very judgment of God.

Don't misunderstand the judgment. The purpose of the judgment is not to determine our destiny. We determine that here and now by our relationship to Jesus Christ. It is only as we believe and trust in Him that we will have eternal life and dwell in heaven with Him. The purpose of the judgment is not to determine our destiny but to determine our reward in that destiny. We are saved by grace, but we will be rewarded by our works. If we have lived faithfully and served our Lord lovingly, then death becomes the doorway to our reward. And those who have gone to a good reward are fortunate. They are to be congratulated.

### Doorway To Resurrection

Death is not only a doorway to rest and reward, but also to resurrection. While the resurrection is not mentioned in this verse, it is affirmed in Rev. 20:5-6.

The Bible teaches us more than immortality or the survival of the spirit of man. It also teaches the resurrection of the body. When Jesus Christ comes back to the earth again, this body which we will bury in a little while will be resurrected. The grave will be opened. It will come to life again. It will be a new and glorious resurrection body and will be like the resurrected body of Christ. As His body was recognizable, so our friend will be recognizable. As His body

transcended the limitations of time and space, so our body will not be subject to the limitations of this life. As His body was no longer subject to disease, and death and decay, so our body will be an immortal body. It will live forever.

Jesus shared this with Martha in her hour of sorrow, when he said, "...I am the resurrection, and the life: He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11:25-26).

And again he declared, "...Because I live, ye shall live also" (John 14:19).

This is death from God's point of view. But I remind you that this resurrected life does not belong to all people. It is a promise only to all those who "...die in the Lord." It is only as we commit ourselves to Jesus Christ and follow Him as Lord and Savior that death can be a blessed experience for us.

When we have Christ as our Savior, death becomes a blessed experience. It becomes the doorway to rest, reward, and resurrection. It becomes the entrance into eternal life.

An unknown poet expressed the truth so beautifully when he wrote:

The stars shine on the earth, And the stars shine on the sea. The stars shine on the face of God, And the stars shine down on me.

The stars shall shine for a thousand years, For a thousand years and a day, But my Christ and I shall still live, When the stars have faded away.